

BILLY BOY



BY LIAM FOXX

To Kim Thanks for believing

THE STATION

Present Day

Prologue

My name is Johnny Hammond and I am sitting here in the middle of nowhere looking through my windscreen at the worst and thickest fog I had ever seen and contemplating why my tom tom sat nav was showing me a blank screen. But I digress to find out why I am in this predicament and to read the most sensational mind blowing story ever told. A story that's every word is true although I am sure you will find it hard to believe it happened exactly how I tell it. Then please bite the bullet and read on. However I Must warn anyone of a nervous disposition it would be better if you put this book down now and read something that is less harrowing on your nerves. For all you other brave souls who are of more robust stock read on and be amazed.

It seemed like such a good idea when the travel magazine had called me asking if I would like to do a travel feature because as a freelance journalist times had been a bit ropey of late and the money would come in very handy. I mused whilst I was waiting to talk to the editor maybe a trip to the states or Thailand or maybe Tahiti I could see myself walking on golden beaches, or lying in the sun with a tall cool drink and getting paid for it what a blast. The editor came on the line and said "Johnny I've got a little thing here that seems right up your street?" I raised my eyebrows to heaven I had been caught by this phrase before and always what was right up your street very much wasn't and I knew this old rat wouldn't have my best interests at heart. Back on the line I listened as the editor told me. "We see you going off the beaten track giving your own personnel touch and insight to the readers about the landscape, hotels, hostelrys and restaurants you know the Full Monty on places of interest in Lancashire." Bloody hell I thought this is too much stuck in the back of beyond in some northern shit hole eating god knows what crap food and living in 0 star accommodation. I replied. "The thing is Bill I have other articles that have deadlines coming up so although I'm very tempted I will have to say no." Jack Shorrock held the phone at eye level and smiled the grin on his face would have made a hungry alligator proud, putting the receiver to his ear again he said. "Is that so'. I caught the infliction that Jack had put upon the so part and as I looked round my dingy flat I thought I wonder what this old wanker knows and believe you me I was about to find out.

He said. "Listen me old tub thumper the days of when you wrote for the big boys is long gone and I happen to have it from a very good source that in a couple of days at the most you will have to boil your shoes to make a meal." I was appalled this really was rock bottom. My voice when I replied was as flat as if it had been put through a mangle. "Who the fuck told you that because there is no truth in that rumour at all and I will have you know that my finances have never been better." Jack grinned at the phone again and thought my how the mighty have fallen, the once untouchable Johnny Hammond the darling of the press and supplements pages a potential Pulitzer Prize winner reduced to lying to the editor of a cheap travel magazine and lying badly. Jack said. "Come on Johnny I got this from Maggie and she should know after all its her that was bailing you out for the last couple of years not that theirs anything wrong with that when your in love and that kind of thing", Jack knew that this would needle him and he wasn't wrong a tirade of abuse came down the phone line. Jack continued saying. "Have we finished our little rant now you sound like a bint that's just lost her virginity behind the bike sheds, you either want this work or you don't under the circumstances I think I've made you a very generous offer plus you get expenses as well what more could you ask for?"

I knew I was beaten there was nothing else on the horizon and nothing likely to be for me in the near future, if I could just use this as a jumping off point to kick start my career again it would be alright I could take the money and use it to cover a big story somewhere after all there were no shortages of major stories breaking around the world. So swallowing my pride I replied. "Ok send me all the information and the schedules for my articles and you've got yourself a writer oh and Jack don't forget the most important thing the shekels and don't try skimping on the expenses though what you could spend them on up there is beyond me." Jack laughed down the phone and said. "This is Lancashire your going to not the Siberian tundra they have been civilised for some centuries now and I'm told even have running water and indoor plumbing besides which as you know beggars can't be choosers." I scowled at the receiver and then told him. "That shows how much you know", I knew that I was being a prat but the truth was I had never been further north than the Midlands all my news and magazine articles had been from around the world the major news items

so I had never had a call to visit the north of his country. But that didn't matter now as on Saturday I would be driving north to describe the beauties of the Lancashire countryside to people who probably didn't give a toss and would be more interested in the articles on the Canarias Isles or Cyprus or Benidorm, rather than a county in the north of Britain. Still the money would be a godsend and no matter how much I was loathe to admit it I was stony as that fucking cow Maggie knew quite well, you can bet her phone bill would have been massive spreading the good news about him to all his ex mates and her cronies. Still he couldn't blame her as the old saying goes hell hath no fury and all that and getting caught fucking your fiancé's best mate in a cupboard at a party might tip any one over the edge so on the whole he had probably got away quite lightly with her telling every one that he was a shit and a brasic shit at that.

So I had received the package from Jack on the Friday I checked the contents but what I was really checking was the money £600 and a note from Jack saying. "Here you go Johnny don't spend this all on drink and loose women oh and by the way every penny has to be accounted for so get receipts for everything will expect first draft on Monday have a nice day." Have a nice day what a silly shit another load of yank nonsense that has been exported over here. Anyway so now let's see where this pleasure trip is taking me first. The itinerary was on the coffee table I grabbed it and looked at the first name on the list Blackburn ok he had heard of this place but only because of the football team. Being a Chelsea fan at heart I had seen Blackburn's team the Rovers on Sky sports once or twice. But where the fuck was the place itself apart from being in Lancashire, I could look it up on the web but I couldn't be bothered turning my note- book on so I rummaged in the kitchen cupboard and found my old road atlas. I found Lancashire in the index and turned to the page looking I found Manchester and then I began to move my finger upwards and there not far off was Blackburn near Preston and a place called Burnley he saw the Pennine chain running up the centre of the area and the towns looked quite close to this feature I knew that I should have no problem finding it with the sat nav. And I was quite at ease if not exactly over joyed with what I had to do. After all I had to do was write a few lines about these places and for a journalist of my calibre that should be simple.

And so I packed my bags made sure the note-book was working and fully charged. I put this into its carry case making sure that the charger was included. Put the bags in the hallway and decided to go and have a farewell drink down the pub, because if what he had been told was true this could be his last descent pint for a few days. Saturday had dawned fine and bright and I set off in a brighter mood than I had been in when first this assignment had been thrust on me. What the hell I thought getting away from the wrath of Maggie for a few days was just what I needed to keep the old pecker up, even if the break was up north. So on to the M6 with the sat nav relaying my every mile to me it was money for old rope or in my case money for old print. Now looking out of the car windscreen at the fog that was all but smothering my car like an old flock mattress, I wondered where it all went wrong. I slapped the sat nav on its top again as though this would make it reveal the workings of its logical mind and might even tell me where I was. But there was no such luck for me for when the fates are against you the old sods law starts working. Well old son I told himself you know where it went wrong that bloody accident on the M6 blocking the carriage way and causing traffic to be diverted. Things went alright at first the sat nav carried me ever onward towards my destination. Then something went completely tits up the sat nav had directed me on course to another galaxy or at least that what it had seemed like at the time. Until with the machines typical scant respect for humans it had finally decided to dump me here on this moor. On a road that was more a cart track than anything, and on top of all that this pissing fog was all I needed to complete this journey of a lifetime leaving me not a happy bunny or even a happy Johnny.

Any way I was desperate to take a leak so I would have to brave the fog outside, because it would be the straw that broke the camels back if I ended up pissing myself. I opened the door and got out the wet fog clung to me like it was trying to be intimate with me. It probed at everything I sniffed there was a funny smell that was hard to place but there was definitely something that smelt fishy or not as the case may be. I zipped up my jeans and peered into the fog. I went back to the car grabbed my jacket and walked in front of the car a short way along the road. Sod this for a bunch of soldiers I thought. Anything could be out here and I might even break a leg in a pot hole and that would be tragic, or even worse I could walk over a sheer drop. Then no one might ever find me so a retreat back to the car was called for double quick. Then he would probably have to sleep in the car till morning or until the fog dispersed. This prospect did not fill him full of joy. But it was better than a nasty accident befalling him in the fog. A wind blew from nowhere right across my front and just for a moment I could see a light or lights at the bottom of the hill. And the road looked like it led straight to them. I moved back to the car got in looked at the sat nav slapped it again and said 'who needs you'. Slipped the car into gear and ever so slowly crept my way down the road towards the lights.

At the bottom of the hill there was what seemed to be a small village at least there were houses but with no lights showing. In fact the whole village was in complete darkness not even a street light to show me welcome. But there was a pub ahead and across the road a railway station. I drew up in front of the station got out and walked across to the pub. There were no lights showing and it seemed to be devoid of life come to think of it he hadn't even heard a dog bark. Jesus I thought to myself this is going to be a great night a night to trip the light fantastic I don't think. In fact you didn't have to be a mind-reader to see exactly what kind of night it was going to be. I glanced at my watch bloody hell it was only nine o' clock I would have thought that it would still be open but you never knew in these little villages. Maybe they all had to be up at the crack of dawn to tend to their sheep or whatever well here goes I thought as I tried the handle on the door it was locked. There was a door knocker which he rapped the door with but all he heard was an empty echoing banging sound from inside. Well he thought I'm not a sound expert but to me this says empty, vacant, no one at fucking home. This was the final straw for Johnny. 'Bastard' he shouted what a fucking one horse town this was. He turned to walk back to the car and so the fog coming back its tendrils spreading out like long tresses floating in water. Well I wasn't going to drive out in it again and risk getting stuck on another piece of moor. The light I had seen from up on the hill was from the station. I decided to check it out and just hoped it wasn't one of these unmanned ones you get nowadays. Over the top was a sign that read Heskett. So this must be the name of the village.

I walked down towards the stations main door but before I got there the light inside went off surely I thought it can't be closed at this time I checked my watch again it was still nine o' clock hellfire I thought now my bloody watch is kaput. I got into the car and thought well that's it lets get out of here I turned the ignition key and nothing happened. Not a light came on the dashboard there was no sound of the engine turning over it was completely dead. I thought fucking bollocks to this and I looked again towards the station but the lights were still out. I fished my mobile phone out of my jacket pocket I could ring the AA and let them sort this bloody mess out. I flipped it open no menu came up no light came on just like the car the phone was in the same predicament as the dodo fucking dead. Getting out of the car again I realised the fog was moving in rapidly again, and if it was possible getting thicker than it was before. Standing there in the centre of a deserted village I felt like a rejected Big Brother contestant and my ideas were running out faster than leaks from Thames Waters pipes. God I wished I'd never bothered with this crap assignment I never wanted to do it in the first place. And the fact that I can't keep the old trouser snake in harness very long, always gets me in trouble if I had kept it in hand so to speak Maggie would still be supplementing me, and I wouldn't be stuck in the middle of this shit hole with no idea what to do.

Just as the unpleasant thought that I would have to sleep in the car was sinking in to my mind. The lights in the station came back on. I didn't know what had happened but if the lights were back on then someone had turned them on. But my inner voice said what if they are on a timer the answer came back into my head that this could be true but then again this was the only game in town. And to me anything was preferable to sleeping in the car. Besides which I was starving and there might be a buffet on the station although to say it wasn't main line was to state the obvious. I walked towards the door noticing that the fog was now a white wall up to the car and another strange thing was how the fog was moving. Not in wisps and tendrils drifting together but it was moving as a solid wall and all the edges were dead straight. I didn't know what it was but the fog frightened me a deep seated fright something I had never felt before bollocks I laughed this was like one of those old Hammer Horror films. The deserted place and tiredness was getting to me well to hell with that my bravado said but underneath I was very uneasy. Turning the handle on the station door I stepped inside I found myself in what I took to be the station entrance hall with a ticket office on the far side. But this was like no station entrance hall I had been to in this country looking round I took in the brown and green tiled walls I saw the advertising boards on the wall were made out of tin and that they advertised stuff that hadn't been around in my life time and maybe not even my dads. Lucifer matches, Wrights coal tar soap, Fenner's little liver pills, Pasha Cigarettes to mention just a few. There were posters up for Blackpool which doesn't seem unusual in a railway station but the children on them were in sailor suits and the adults were depicted in full length bathing costumes. The type you see in old silent movies there were old wooden benches lining the walls. The ticket counter was a square hole in the wall and at the moment a square shutter with closed written on it was pulled down sealing it off there was also a short counter on the front and by the way on the top a well used one.

This was weird what the hell was going on round here. And then through the tiredness it clicked in my brain like the snapping back of a dislocated knee-cap this was one of those enthusiasts' railways. The

ones were people with no lives came to reconstruct the days of the old railway steam engines. Which they then ran on refurbished old branch lines between a couple of stations. But I thought actually some ran for a few miles and this might be one of them if so it could probably drop me in a better location than this. Let's face it anything had to be a better location than this the main job now was to find someone and hopefully with some luck get to a larger village or town. I stepped up and knocked on the ticket shutter. "Hello", I called but nobody came. I rapped again harder this time saying. "Hello is anybody home", again no reply came from behind the shutter. This time I pounded on it shouting. "Come on you fucking anorak bastards open the bloody shutter somebody actually wants to buy a ticket for your one engine railway", there was nothing just an oppressive silence. I glanced at the clock above the counter and it read nine o' clock well at least that was consistent their clock had stopped as well. And then I turned to go back through the door I was now resigned to spending the night in the car. I was just about to grab the handle to open the door when from the opposite side of the ticket hall there was a loud clanking and rushing sound and past the frosted glass panes in the doors to the platform lights sped by and a wind buffeted the doors. An acrid smell of smoke and steam came into the hall as the train thundered by then everything was silent again not a sound from anywhere. This is great I thought surely there's bound to be someone on the platform with trains running an enthusiast or two must be around. And with that thought I turned and crossed the ticket hall grabbed the handle of the platform door and turned it.

Stepping through the door onto the platform I was taken back a moment by the fog the only bit of vision I had was in front of me. I looked right and left trying to judge the length of the platform but it was hard to judge anything in the wisps and swirls that the fog created. I closed the door to the ticket hall and stepped further forward onto the platform. There was no wind or even a small breeze but the fog moved like there was. I thought I could make out shapes off to my left so turned that way to investigate. As I began moving I could swear that there were definitely more shapes now forming in the fog. But I must have been bone weary because I didn't seem to be making much head way towards the shapes so I shouted. "Hi there can someone tell me where I am, look if its not to much trouble can someone please answer me?" Suddenly a band tightened around my head I had never felt anything like it in my life the sheer pain was unbearable and it drove me down to my knees. God I thought this must be a stroke I tried to shout help me but only a croak escaped my lips and still the band tightened even more than I thought possible. A red mist hung in front of my eyes and it was like looking through the red film part of a pair of 3D specs. Then the band uncoiled and the grip on my head ceased the relief was so massive that blackness descended on me and the last thing I remember was falling forwards then nothing.

Consciousness came back slowly and I opened one eye very gingerly hoping that the band would not start tightening round my skull again. I saw light and there was no pain so I opened my eye fully and saw girders running across in my vision and wooden slats and what looked like windows. Now I opened my other eye and focused on what was happening I appeared to be led on my back staring up at the platform roof. Looking left I could see the wall of the booking hall looking right I could make out the edge of the platform clearly defined. I sat up rather unsteady and to my amazement could see the length of the platform in front of me I could also see people a mixture of men and women children and down near the end of the platform a group of soldiers. I stood up on shaky legs and looked around the whole platform the fog was defined as it had been out at the front. It enclosed the three sides of the platform like prison walls and I thought to myself no way can this be right no way is this natural, because in nature fog is never as uniformed as this something was very wrong with the picture. Walking towards a family group to find out if they had any idea what was going on I noticed the clothes they where wearing were not exactly Armani nor were they Hillfinger or any other clothes from this century. Then I thought no they wouldn't be I remembered my insight about this railway these must be the enthusiasts who ran it dressed as the part it must have been a special day or maybe they did this every weekend got into costume to entertain the tourists that used the line. I was nearing the family now and took in what they were wearing. The man had on a three-piece tweed suit with what appeared to be a watch chain worn across the waistcoat a white shirt and tie brown boots and he was wearing a bowler hat. The woman had on a tight blue dress buttoned up to the throat and with a kind of bustle at the back, the kind you see in the old horror films a cameo brooch was pinned over her left breast. She was wearing either black shoes or they may have been boots it was hard to tell as the dress came down to the floor and to complete her ensemble she was wearing a large sun hat and carrying a parasol. The young boy with them was wearing a blue sailor suit with white trim on the large collar and had on a white straw hat with a blue ribbon round it. The young girl had a pretty pink and white dress on and pink ribbons in her long blonde hair. They looked just like the advertising poster in the ticket hall.

I said. "Hello I was wondering if you could help me please I got lost in the fog and ended up in this village", the man said nothing. I continued saying. "I would appreciate it if you could tell me if there's a bed & breakfast or even another pub in the village?" Still the man made no reply. I went on. "See what it is my car has broken down and I tried calling the AA but there's no signal for my mobile and I'm stuck here and what with the fog. I mean have you seen the fog there is something very iffy about the fog so I thought you could maybe help being local and all?" During this time the man and his family had neither looked at me nor replied to my request for information I was seething if there's one thing I can't stand its ignorant people so I said. "Listen here mate I don't know whether it's my accent or the fact that your just pig ignorant but where I come from if someone speaks to you it is polite to speak back to them." Still he ignored me so I shouted at him. "No wonder there's only you enthusiasts here you won't get many tourists with your attitude to life." I spun on my heel muttering under my breath fucking northern bastards what a set of shits. There was a guy dressed as a station master by the doors to the ticket hall maybe I could get some sense out of him unless round here they were all as unfriendly as the family I had just tried talking too. I strolled towards him noticing that the uniform he had on was spotless and pristine. Surely this man must be one of the ones in charge round here one of the leading lights of these enthusiasts. Now facing the man I opened my mouth to speak but before I said a word he spoke saying. "You shouldn't be here mister." I replied. "Now hang on just a minute why shouldn't I be here is this private property or something?" He just said. "It's not right, you're not right", the man's voice seemed to surround and overwhelm me. I stared at the man in amazement. He was a tall man with grey hair under his cap he had rather a florid nose, big ears and was aged about seventy and he had amazing piercing blue eyes that did not fit with his age. I said to him. "Look what is it with you people round here I just want some information for god's sake?" He stared straight ahead saying "You must go leave this place at once." I replied. "I'll be fucked if I'll go you might run this shit hole railway but that doesn't mean that you can insult me and order me about this is still a free country and I happen to be a member of the press." The station master looked into my eyes and said. "I have told you to go you don't belong here so be gone!" The stare from the man was hypnotic but more than that it felt to me as though my whole body was draining of energy I felt like a limp piece of lettuce the kind you get on motorway services sandwiches. The man glanced away and whatever had been holding me released its grip and I felt alright again. I tried to reason with him. "Listen nobodies trying to piss on your parade if this is a private function for you enthusiasts then please forgive me for interrupting it like I say I just want some information. If it's not too much to ask is there any other accommodation in this village besides the shut down pub across the road?"

In the distance a whistle shrieked the sound it made was like all the banshees in hell had screamed at once it reverberated across the landscape and then died. The station master looked at me with a grave face saying. "Too late now much too late I warned you to go you should have gone when I told you." He took a pocket watch out and looked at it as he said. "It's never late and it never misses a passenger." The people on the platform were all looking in the direction from which the whistle had sounded and the look on their faces was hopeless resignation. I turned to the station master and said to him. "Well thanks for all your help I'll be going now I can find a house in the village to put me up or sleep in the car I don't want to spoil your big day." I started to move towards the exit doors but a funny thing was happening to my legs they wouldn't work and I found that I was rooted to the spot. No matter how hard I willed and tried to move my legs there was no chance I was stuck panic seized me what the hell was going on here? I had been scared only a few times in my life and never like this, sweat was running down my face and cold fingers played a melody up and down my spine. The station master turned to me saying. "There is no way back you weren't supposed to be here but now you are that's it." I stuttered. "You can't hold me here against my will that's kidnapping Its against the law and people know where I am please let me go I won't say anything about It to anyone you can go back to whatever it is your up to and I will just leave you to it after all Its none of my business", my voice was rising in panic now. The station master looked at me with his hypnotic piercing eyes and said. "Come with me", and he started walking down the platform. The legs that wouldn't move before were released and I found that I could follow him as he told me. "Sit there and wait", and he said pointed to an empty luggage barrow. He continued saying. "I need to check some things out to see what will happen to you", and he turned on his heel and walked towards a lit office on the platform.

I went to sit on the barrow and it was then I noticed that there was a man dressed like a soldier sat on it so I said. "Don't mind if I join you, maybe you could tell me what's going on round here I seem to be somewhere I shouldn't?" I sat down and looked at the man who was turned sideways on and looking down the platform at the other group dressed as soldiers. But this was no old sweat but a boy of about sixteen or seventeen I held my hand out saying. "Hi my names Johnny how's It going", there was no response no

recognition that the boy had heard or even knew I was there. I thought this is like the fucking twilight zone but there has to be a logical explanation to this and the one thing I did know now was that this was not an enthusiast's enactment this was something far more eerie and strange. It was also very sinister in its way and the only thing I could think was that I must have been in an accident in the village and was now in a coma either trapped in the car or in hospital. This must be what happened when you were comatose kept going round in my head but I couldn't think why I would be dreaming about something as weird as this and why not about something pleasant. I could see why people in comas dreaming about nice things would want to stay there but I would have thought that a nightmare like this would have had me trying to wake up from it pronto.

Well that was it he would have to make the best of it until he recovered his consciousness now that he understood what was happening he felt more relaxed more in control. He looked up and down the platform at the other people that were there, besides the family with the two children there was an old man in frock coat and top hat. Two young ladies dressed in the same type of dress as the woman with the family and with dainty little hats on. Three sailors that he hadn't noticed before and a man with a round face wearing a tweed hat and wearing a tweed suit with black boots carrying a walking stick and with a black spaniel at his side. Two young men wearing straw boaters striped blazers and white pants with black shoes. The young boy himself and twelve soldiers at the opposite end about twenty five people altogether.

I still couldn't figure out why I could have no rapport with these other people why there was no recognition from them that I was here. After all if this was my coma surely things should work on my terms so I stood up and shouted. "Fuck you lot!!!" it echoed round the platform the fog holding it in and amplifying it. Nothing, no one looked or even moved it was as though I didn't exist. Sitting back down I stroked my chin obviously things weren't on my terms the brain must do what it wants in these situations a bit like a lottery some people must get happy dreams and some nightmares and with my luck I had drawn the nightmare. I felt a tickling on the back of my neck I turned my head and saw the young boy looking at me and then he said. "You shouldn't be here." I replied. "Why not this is my coma not yours so piss off somewhere else if you don't like it". The boy smiled at me saying. "If that's what you think good on you keep that thought", and he looked towards the other soldiers. I looked at him closely he had dark hair and brown eyes and looked on closer inspection to project an older more world weary glance on everything. He was also well set and looked fairly tall which gave an appearance of someone older. Wearing a faded and well worn uniform of khaki tunic and trousers he had khaki bandages wrapped up both legs and black boots scuffed and with studs in the soles. The tunic was open down the front and as I looked closer I could see it was stained but not only that. There were holes in it a line of holes running across the front and as he looked something oozed out of them and ran down the front. I thought that's it come on wake up get me out of this enough is enough I cant take any more of this fucking nightmare. The panic had set in again the logical thought process from before had flown out the window the sheer terror I now felt was eating me up. In fact the back of my pants felt exceedingly wet and I was wondering if I had coughed in my rompers and left a deposit. Looking again the boy was staring back at me and didn't seem fazed at all just held my gaze very steady and said. "It's not as bad as it looks", he looked down at his tunic. Then he continued. "It doesn't hurt anymore the only pain is why it happened?" I asked him. "Are those your friends down at the end the other soldiers why not go and join them?" He smiled at me saying. "Friends you could say that, comrades even but I can never be with them." I thought I could see what had happened so I said. "Oh you did something wrong and they've sent you to Coventry well I'm sure it couldn't have been that bad?" I thought boy is this weird and it's getting worse by the minute still there's nothing else I can do till I wake up but go along with what's happening.

The boy grabbed hold of my hand his touch was ice cold and felt very disturbing I shivered like someone had walked over my grave as he said. "You don't understand, you sit there and you shouldn't be here and still you don't understand", the boy glared at me. I replied. "Look I'm sorry if your mates won't talk to you that's a bummer but it's not my fault." I was beginning to get pissed off with what was happening here as I continued. "I can't understand why or what you are doing in my dream I didn't ask for any of this?" The train whistle howled in the distance again the boy looked towards the sound then quickly back at me as he told me. "You see the reason I can't be with my mates is because they are the firing squad that shot me for cowardice in 1916." My jaw dropped open I looked at him and I honestly couldn't believe my ears so I said. "Say that again and please let me know me what the hell is going on around here?" He replied. "To tell you the truth I'm not sure what's happening myself, but I feel like I've been sat here a thousand years. The only thing I do know is that you shouldn't be here and that I've never heard that train whistle before." He rubbed his hands together but I knew no warmth would ever flow through them again he continued saying. "These could be the final moments for me. It looks like were going on to another place another time." I asked. "What

place and what time?" He replied. "I don't know maybe the station master knows but I don't I can just feel it very strongly that there will be no more waiting around." I looked at him and he smiled again and his youthfulness shone out of him as he said. I feel a pressure that I must tell you my story in the hope that the injustice done to me and others like me is corrected." The look in his dead eyes was one of pleading and I felt as though I knew him from somewhere and I had the same compulsion to listen to his story so I told him to carry on.

He said to me. "We have the time. Let me introduce myself my name is William Lamb but everybody calls me Billy Boy and this is my story...."

PART ONE

The Begining August 1914 Febuary 1915

Chapter One

My name is William Lamb and as I rolled out of bed and looked through the window of my third floor room at what was a gloriously sunny Sunday morning I could hear Mrs. Moffat my landlady clattering about down stairs. And the person I shared the room with George Drew was already up and about and probably getting ready to tuck into breakfast. George was of slim build average height a dapper fellow with brown hair and brown eyes and had been my friend since I arrived here. I yawned and stretched. I was a big lad for my age which was just fifteen and I had been working in Dombridges foundry for just over a year now. I had left the little village of Heskett in the year 1913 and made for the large town of Blackthorn which was about twelve miles away because I needed to make my way in the world. I had been brought up by an uncle after my parents were killed in a gas explosion when I was seven my uncle didn't have much time for me apart to use me for free labour on the small holding he ran. But I couldn't blame him as having seven other children of his own another mouth to feed was not easy. And at least he had kept and looked after me when he could just as easily have sent me to the orphanage in Blackthorn so I was thankful to him for that. Like I say I am big for my age and working on the land had given me a good strength in my muscles and filled me out and I had done very well at the village school with my education, finishing top of the class in quite a few subjects and Miss Dander's wanted me to stay and learn more but it was impossible. So I had written to a friend of my late fathers who was a foreman at Dombridges foundry and the man knowing my situation had replied offering me a job as a labourer. So I had packed my few belongings including my fathers pocket watch and chain and saying goodbye to my uncle and his family who I must admit seemed glad to see the back of me. I went off to make my way in the outside world. Although my name is William every body calls me Billy Boy I dressed in my Sunday best as after breakfast most of the household would be attending church. For this was the summer of 1914, and in this day and age it was expected of people that they attend church on a Sunday and show true reverence to god and to their country. And afterwards there would be a stroll through the Queens Park to have a chat with friends and acquaintances, and to watch the young ladies promenading themselves this was the highlight of the week.

But this Sunday the 28 June 1914 was to have far reaching consequences not just for Britain but for the whole world. For in Sarajevo in far off Serbia there was going to be an assassination and when the Archduke and Duchess of Austria lay dead it would set in motion a series of events that would plunge the World into War! But this had not happened yet as I made my way down to breakfast. I pulled out a chair and sat down just as Mrs Moffat came in with bacon and eggs on a plate and placed it in front of me saying. "Teas in the pot and there's bread and butter on the table if you want it", and she gestured with her hand. From the chair opposite me George Drew smiled at this taking some little satisfaction. My face went red Mrs Moffat looked on me as a surrogate son as her own two boys were serving in the army in India she bustled back out of the room and went to the kitchen. George said. "Well when you've finished I think there's just time for a gentle stroll and a smoke before church." I was tucking in to my bacon and egg and really enjoying it for this was a treat every Sunday morning. I picked up a thick slice of fresh bread and said to him. "Pass the butter please." It was handed to me and I proceeded to spread a large amount on the slice as I said. "Thanks", through a mouthful of bread.

George said. "I'll just nip up to the room and get my cigarettes you should be finished by the time I come down", and with this he stood up and left the room. I finished my breakfast by wiping the last of the egg yolk and bacon grease from my plate with a bit of bread I got up and patted my stomach feeling everything was right with the world. Mrs Moffat who had come back into the room to clear the plates told me. "Don't you be late for church me lad and don't you let that George Drew lead you astray he's older than you and should have more sense." George was only eighteen and I would be sixteen quite soon so I replied. "I won't Ma don't you fret yourself if anything it will be me looking after George." She liked me to call her Ma and shaking her round faced grey head she said. "Well now be off with you then there's more as will be down e4xpecting their breakfast in a minute." I walked out into the hallway then went along the passage and opened the front door. George joined me saying. "Let's get out of here before the rest of them come down and we get stuck making polite conversation." We walked through the front door of 123 General Gordon Street and into a beautiful hot summer's morning. In fact today all over Britain people were waking up to another scorcher in London cleaners were cleaning up the mess that had been made at Hyde Park by the crowds that had turned out on Saturday to watch the display in front of the King by the London Fire Brigade. More than 5,000 spectators had been thrilled with the Brigades dash and daring and the finale of a gallop past the king was exhilarating. At Henley the annual regatta was due to take place soon and preparations were continuing for it and what better weather for people to be out on the river in boating parties enjoying the day. The All-England lawn tennis championships were half way through and due to recommence on the Monday. At the seaside people strolled and paddled in the sea listened to the bands on the pavilions and generally had a whale of a time in the best weather for sometime.

We where nearing St Luke's church when we spotted Mr Nutall a rather stern man he was the foreman who had given me my labouring job at Dombridges. We both said together. "Morning Mr Nutall isn't it a lovely day?" He answered. "Yes its fair champion and it will get hotter yet let's just hope it stays like this for the wakes weeks." The Wakes Weeks were the annual public holidays for all the workers two weeks in which most towns were virtually ghost towns as everybody took off to the seaside or the countryside en mass. A two week break for people that worked long and hard hours and that everybody looked forward to. He continued. "Anyway I'm off inside now so don't you two be chatting out here all day and being late for the service or you know who you will answer to. Mr Nutall sang in the choir and was going in to get ready. We both told him. "We won't after all we wouldn't want to miss your singing." He turned rather a jaundice eye on us weighing up if we were having a laugh at his expense and then said. "See that you don't", and with this he went in through the front porch. Smoking our cigarettes we watched the different people turn up for church George took a particular interest in the young ladies that were arriving with their families. Yes he certainly fancied himself as a ladies man did George and was always trying to get Sally Pearson who lived in the same digs into the cupboard under the stairs for some spooning as he called it. And much to my incomprehension he was always learning new dances like the Bunny Hug and even more bizarre the Turkey Trot! I knew nothing about these things so I left it to George to show off his skills at the church dance on Saturday nights. I also knew next to nothing about young ladies although I had held hands with Helen Shaw a girl just slightly older than myself. But I only did this when we were alone or out for a walk or in the Rev Loveday's lantern slide show in the church hall and in my book holding hands was tantamount to being engaged to be married so I thought I should take things slower. We moved inside it was cool in the church and as we made our way to our favourite pew right at the back where we hoped the vicar could not see us if we nodded off. Mrs Lucas the rock of the church morals committee and a believer that there was much to do to save the young from a life of sinfulness and moral degeneration cast here baleful eye over the two of us. The look she gave us seemed to confirm that she thought that we two in particular that needed saving. She said to us. "Take these hymn books and shall we try this week to sing the praises of God, instead of falling asleep at the back?" She thrust the books into our hands and gave us a look of distaste saying. "I will have my eye on you and don't you forget it so let's have no slacking during the service or you will

know what's what." The pair of us nearly fell over each other in a bid to get away from her and her razor sharp tongue and into the safety of our pew.

George said. "Well I never the old gorgon certainly don't like us I hope her stays crease her, what have we ever done to wrong." He glanced back to where she was standing and he shook his head. "You know it's just because were young she's like that with all the young people." I grinned at him saying. "She must have never been young herself or she has nothing better to do than twist our tails for something to do." The organ struck up and the service was about to start as I continued. "It's because we don't live with our families and are making our own way in life to her that is the end of the world so its best to just ignore her." The organ music trailed off and the Rev Loveday climbed in to the pulpit and said to us all. "The first hymn we will sing is Jerusalem." At last the service was coming to an end it had stuttered on for close on two hours. The sun had shone through the stained glass windows mottling the high alter, the church floor and the pews in a rainbow of colours. And although this was pretty to look at it could not entertain anyone for two hours let alone two young chaps like us. To make matters worse the sermon that Rev Loveday delivered had to be the most lengthy and boring that I had ever had to sit through he just droned on and on but there was no chance of having a kip. For every time that mine and Georges head drooped a stern cough would come from across the aisle and there would be Mrs Lucas glaring at us with enough venom to keep our eyes open forever. At last though and just as I was contemplating murder Rev Loveday said. "We will sing our last hymn onward Christian Soldiers and let's hear the rafters ring with the force of our voices." Finally the last strains from the organ faded and the congregation made a swift exit for the door headed by me and George who had a start on the others by being in the back pew. Going out through the porch the Vicar was there to greet us he shook our hands saying. "Billy George nice to see you it was also nice to see that you managed to keep awake this week though no doubt that was entirely due to the ever faithful Mrs Lucas who has been keeping an eye on you." He smiled at us I managed to look bashful and George had a red flush on his cheeks we extracted ourselves and walked down the path to the gate where we waited to say our good byes to the people we knew.

I turned to George offering my cigarettes saying to him. "Here do you want a Pasha?" He asked. "When are you going to buy a decent brand instead of these weeds?" He always said this to me just because he bought Navy Cut he seemed to think it made him a man of the world when all it really did was cost him a dammed sight more than my Pashas. We stood smoking at the bottom of the path and after saying our good byes to everyone we were the last left. He said. "Shall we catch the tram into town and take a stroll round the park?" I replied. "Why not and we could have a lemonade or two to quench our thirst." And with that we set off for the tram stop at the bottom of the hill all of a sudden there was a loud clanking sound as the tram came towards us. Sparks burst overhead as the power bar that supplied power to the tram passed over insulators on the overhead electric wires. As it pulled up to the stop I saw it was one of the old types with the open top. As we waited for the other people to board I read the advertising hoardings on the trams side Kiwi Shoe Polish, Dr Bells Universal Embrocating Rub and Navy Cut Cigarettes. We boarded and went upstairs to the open top deck it was pleasant in the open air and a lot better than it was in the winter when nobody wanted to sit on the top deck for fear of getting soaked or freezing to death in the strong northerly winds that blew. Off we went towards the town. It was a right rattle trap and sounded like the old scrap merchants cart that used to clang down the street in his never ending search for any kind of metal he could get. And it really felt as though the wheels had been transformed into squares with too much use we stared over the side silent because conversation was impossible because of the clatter of the carriage on the tram lines. And sitting on the wooden seats was really uncomfortable as they smashed into your back every time the tram went over a set of points so all in all I was glad to get off at our stop on Queens Road when it came up.

As the tram pulled away we could see the park gates across the street and the crowd of people that were entering through them. We crossed the street and I said. "Come on let's get in before the rest of the town gets here." Gorge replied. "Just wait a minute there's Mabel Smith I'll just go and

have a word with her”, and with this statement George made a bee line for her. While I waited for him I scanned the people going in through the park gates there was the usual mix of mothers and fathers with their kids, old people, young men and women. But hanging about leaning on the railings near the entrance was a different type of park user these were a gang of toughs from the slums on the other side of town. And whether they had come to make trouble like busting a few heads or whether they had come to pick a pocket or two was anybody’s guess but I thought it best to keep an eye on them. This was pretty easy because they dressed in the same type of clothes. Belt and braces with their shirt sleeves rolled up and cloth caps on their heads and they had a look of starving wolves about them. George came back saying. “She’s promised me a dance on Saturday night”, he had a huge smile plastered on his mug. He continued. “And maybe a bit of spooning as well if I’m lucky and I think I might be in with a chance.” I looked at him and I really couldn’t see what he was getting all worked up about. Mabel Smith worked in the same drapery shop as him and although quite pretty she was nothing special. I thought this with all my fifteen years of experience on this earth nevertheless I couldn’t stand his bragging so I taunted him saying. “Bloody hell its George Drew cock of the walk.” He gave me a very sour look and said. “Come on let’s take our constitutional before any more people get here.” We started into the park and I brought his attention to the men leaning on the railings as I told him. “Just glance to your right.” He moved his eyes to the right then replied. “I can see them there a rough looking bunch of coves aren’t they still I dare say there here to meet up for a whippet race or badger baiting or even a crown & anchor session.” He could have been right for these men came from Highercrop a large area of terraced slums on the far side of the town. He continued saying “Anyway I doubt if they will bother us and there’s a couple of policemen over yonder keeping an eye on them so let’s just enjoy the day.” So we strolled past them and into the park.

Queens Park was a large park for its size there were lots of open lawn space, acres of formal flower beds and two bandstands and a large boating lake it had several bowling greens and two cafes where you could buy refreshments. We headed to one of these first being rather parched on this glorious day we sat down at a table outside. I caught the eye of the young girl that was serving and said. “Two lemonades please miss.” From here we could look out onto the main walkway through the park and observe everyone enjoying their Sunday stroll and especially the young lads and lasses promenading around the place. The lads were trying to look aloof but they never took their eyes off the lasses whilst these same lasses walked by giggling and whispering to one another. Gorge was slavering as he said to me. “Just look at her in the purple dress what I wouldn’t give to be alone with her for a while.” I replied rather exasperatingly. “What for there’s plenty walking round here even for you I would have thought.” At times he really did get my goat. Most of the lasses in the park were domestics or shop girls and there were nannies walking children in their perambulators. For this was the premier park in Blackthorn the best and most respectable. There were no mill girls here with their shawls covering their heads and, no miners with their wives and children, none of the poor from the slum areas of the town. They had their own park that was about the size of an allotment on the far side of the town. But for people of whatever social class these were the only pieces of open land in Blackthorn. And where better to go on a beautiful summer’s day than to these havens of green in a sea of grimy black smoggy streets that this town became reduced to in the winter.

George was quite peeved and asked. “What's the matter with you today?” I answered him. “Nothing let’s go for a look round and maybe have a go on the rowing boats.” He replied. “Yes that sounds gradely and we can have fish & chips in the other cafe down there after we have had a row round the lake.” We both stood up and I got the attention of the cafe girl and paid for our refreshments we then set off at a leisurely pace towards the boating lake. On arrival at the lake we could see it was crowded people were sitting on the banks having picnics or just enjoying the sun. The boats were doing a roaring trade and we had to wait quite a while before a skiff was free the boat attendant shouted to us. “Come on lads we haven't got all day if you don't want it someone else will.” George gave him the money and climbed in he sat down on the seat in the rear of the skiff meaning that I would get to do the rowing again. But it didn't bother me all that much as I liked to take some

exercise and besides which my hands were like iron with working in the foundry all day. But poor Georges were like a baby's bottom and an hour of rowing up and down the lake would have left them blistered and extremely painful. I rowed out onto the lake making for the large Island in the middle where I would row round it and back down the lake again. The majority of the rowers were either like me and George or young couples out for some privacy to chat or whatever else young couples did. But we always went round the Island for on the far side which was screened by its bulk from the shore and the boat attendant. Young couples would either anchor there craft to the shore and sit holding hands together on the rear seat or maybe even put their arms round each other and hold on for grim life or they would embark onto the Island only the most daring and risqué did this however. And it was clearly against the rules for there were signs all over it telling you it was prohibited to be on the Island.

George said. "Come on Billy Boy a quick spin round the Island let's see what's happening." He was fascinated by what went on there and we always had to take at least one turn around it. I had just found my stroke when he shouted. "Look there's Jenny Biggs!" I was startled and the oar skimmed off the water instead of carving through it and there I was on my back in the bottom. I yelled at him from my rather ungainly position in the bottom of the skiff. "You fucking idiot." When all of a sudden there was an almighty thump on the side a hollow thud that reverberated through the hull. I pulled myself up in time to see Tommy Smith with some of his mates laughing fit to bust. He was my rival or so he thought for Helen Shaw because he was walking out with her before she took a shine to me. He lived near her in Cromwell Street and he thought himself a bit of a Jack the Lad. He was the same age as George and worked in the offices at the foundry this made him think he was also better than me he was still laughing when he said. "You want to watch your self Billy Boy if you can't handle the oars gets off the water you could have sunk us running into our boat like that." Now his mates were laughing and jeering at us. So I replied. "Look here Tommy Smith I don't need a tea boy like you to tell me or show me how to row and it was you that ran into us on purpose." His face went bright red and I knew my insult had hit home. There might have been trouble if the Boating Attendants helper hadn't turned up at that moment in a boat shouting. "Come on you daft buggers stop messing around and you get your boat back in number three it should have been in ten minutes ago so get it back in now or I will charge you for another hour'. All boats were numbered and number three was the number of Tommy's boat when your time was up the attendants shouted your number through a speaking trumpet telling you to come in.

They back paddled with their oars and disengaged their boat from ours then as they rowed back for shore Tommy Smith shouted. "I will see you at work Billy Boy and that's a promise." It didn't bother me as I knew it was just another of his idle threats and I'd heard loads of them since I took up with Helen. So I did what for me was normal and completely ignored him as the assistant said to us. "You two watch where you're going and what you're doing." And with that parting shot he rowed away back towards the shore. I turned to George saying. "Bloody hell that's your fault looking at girls again and screaming like a banshee." I looked at him for the first time since the shout that had left me on my ass at the bottom of the boat. He was sat holding his back in both hands with a look of intense pain on his face so I asked. "What's wrong with you then?" He replied. "When those idiots rammed into us I was stood up looking the other way the thump when they hit nearly tipped me into the water trying not to end up swimming I sat down hard on the seat and my back smashed into the back rest of the seat with a hell of a lot of force." He pulled up his jacket and shirt and showed me his back. There was a bruise in the shape of a stripe across his middle back and it was quickly turning black and purple so I asked. "Is it bad?" He replied feeling his back "No it's not bad just bruised but it hurts like hell." I retrieved the oar and said to him. "You should be fine after good nights kip so never mind come on lets go get our fish & chips." Fitting the lost oar back into the rowlock I proceeded to row us steadily back to shore.

We had a fine tea of fish & chips at the lake side café then we strolled back to the tram stop on Queens Road with George complaining about his back all the way. I noticed as we got to the gates

a large crowd had gathered watching something or other and I pointed it out to George. As we got closer we saw a row of Police vans drawn up at the side into them were being loaded the toughs we had noticed hanging round the gates when we went into the park. We listened to some people in the crowd who were explaining there had been some kind of fight between this gang and another from across town. And that it was probably to do with gambling said a fat man who seemed to know more than he should about this subject anyway it seems we had arrived just after they had been arrested and they were now being transported to the cells. Although judging by the struggles that were going on some of them were none too keen about it. Gorge his face burning with righteous zeal said. "Didn't I tell you that lot were trouble when I first set eyes on them?" I replied waspishly. "No you bloody didn't in fact it was me that told you about them when we first got here but you were too busy making cows eyes at Mabel Smith to take much notice." George looked at me with a hurt expression on his face saying. "But I told you they were rum coves I got that right didn't I?" Grabbing his arm and pulling him with me I thought it was a waste of time arguing so I said. "Come on there's a tram due anytime let's get on it and get home." We walked over to the stop just in time to board the tram we eventually got back to 123 General Gordon Street and found that Mrs Moffat had made us a cup of cocoa which we drank even though we could hardly keep our eyes open it had been a tiring day to say the least Then finally after finishing our drink we went up to bed for a good night's kip the better to start the day tomorrow with. So the following morning it was back to work but not before George had let me know just how sore his back was and that he had hardly slept a wink all night and looking at the way he was standing as stiff as a board I could well believe him. I didn't see the paper that morning and if I had I wouldn't have given a second thought to the news of an assassination of the Archduke of Austria and his wife. For what had happened over there had nothing to do with us and most of the people of Britain would have felt the same what the people were doing was getting on with their daily business as usual. After all it would be the wakes holidays in a few weeks and every body would be getting away for the week money would be drawn out of the holiday clubs and people would be having a good time with it so little attention was paid to some foreigners and their problems. But what the British public did not realise was that despite the good weather the clouds of war were gathering over Europe and that pretty soon they would burst.

What had started as an Austrian problem with Serbia had by the middle of July turned into much more but still most people took no notice about what was happening over there. Reading the paper on the 23 July I saw that Austria had sent Serbia a note of protest but as the paper put it this was really an ultimatum. They informed the Serbs they had forty-eight hours to reply to the demands and accusations it contained I glanced at the paper but didn't really take it in. More and more stories were appearing in the newspapers all through the following days. In London the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey was arranging a conference to be convened in which four powers would settle the problems of Austria and Serbia as soon as possible by arbitration sighs of relief could be heard all over the continent. Whilst the people of Britain just ignored most of what was happening but little did they know that even as Sir Edward was in the middle of arranging this, a note from the Austrian Ambassador was delivered to his office? It was couched in diplomatic jargon but it was a declaration of war by Austria on Serbia there was no way of stopping the march of war now. I was taking a lot more interest in the stories that were appearing now even to my young mind war was never a good thing. By the 29th of July Austria had been at war with Serbia for nearly twenty-four hours they had shelled Belgrade and the whole of Europe was in ferment. I asked George Drew that night. "Have you read the paper this Austrian affair is all over the pages?" George looked over at me from the armchair in the corner of the sitting room where he was smoking a cigarette before going to bed as he replied. "If they want to fight let them after all it's their concern but if they tangle with us it will be different our boys will show them." I was just thinking about this when he continued. "Look this is a foreign thing over on the Continent their always having a go at one another so don't worry about it." This was said with all the wisdom and experience of an eighteen year old so I forgot about it but not for long. Only a few people in this country knew that each of the major powers in Europe believed it had something to gain by going to war. Whether it was territory, power, or to teach an upstart country a lesson. The only country that had nothing to gain was tiny Serbia for surely she must perish

or be absorbed by a bigger country. No the only thing Serbia could claim with Austria taking a share of the blame that a shot fired in its country would go down in history as the reason for plunging Europe into the Great War.

I came down for breakfast early on Bank Holiday Monday George was still having a lie in upstairs. I had looked outside this morning at the weather the sun was out and there was not a cloud in the sky I was glad because over the weekend the weather had been very close and cloudy. And I expected it to be the same today what with everybody being off for the holiday but I got a nice surprise. Mrs Moffat popped out of the kitchen saying. "Breakfast isn't ready yet Billy Boy." She walked along the hallway towards me and enquired. "Your up early for a holiday aren't you I thought you might have stopped in bed for an extra hour?" She wiped her hands on her apron and beamed at me. I told her. "Don't worry about me Ma I'll just go into the sitting room and read the paper if it's here and maybe have a smoke until breakfasts ready." She smiled at me again and replied. "You're a good boy the papers on the hall stand you have a look at it whilst I get on with the cooking and I will call you when it's ready." I turned picked up the paper and went into the sitting room as I opened the paper the headline caught my eye Germany had declared war on Russia. But not just this she had invaded Luxembourg and was on the brink of invading Belgium I read on avidly and there was a lot of news all the way through about the crisis enveloping the Continent. But after all this was Britain. And so being Britain there was room in the paper for what was happening in London. There was an Anglo-American exhibition at the White City complete with Wild West scenes. An exhibition of Spain recreated at Earls Court complete with real flamenco dancers. And there was a flying display due to take place at Hendon. There was also a lot more holiday entertainment in the paper but after all I thought why not it was a gradley day and there was no work today and peace still reigned.

George entered the room and then he looked over my shoulder at the headline saying. "It seems to have got a bit serious from the look of things." But I thought to myself surely not on a day as nice as this I was not going to let anything bother me and that was a fact. He put his hand on my shoulder and said. "Come on Ma Moffat has breakfast ready and we can plan what we are going to do today while we eat." As I followed him out I never thought this would be our last Bank Holiday together but then again why should I have done because we had a lovely day out. Mrs Moffat packed a picnic basket for us and said to us. "Go on you two get from under my feet be off with you." But it was said with a smile from her and we knew it was her joking. So we went down to the park we spread our picnic on the grass by the boating lake and the sun shone down on us. We tucked in to cold chicken and pork pie pickles and boiled eggs which we washed down with lemonade. Ma had done us proud and I sometimes wonder if some kind of intuition had warned her what was about to happen. On the way home we went to the New Electric Picture Palace to watch a new Charlie Chaplain film that was on. We were still laughing as we came out but we didn't laugh for long. For out here on the street we could hear the paperboys shouting out the headline. Germany Declares War On France!!! Gorge said to me "Get a paper off one of them Billy Boy let's find out what's going on." I shouted to one of the lads. "Give us a paper over here will you?" A lad ran to us and thrust a paper into my hand I took it and gave him the money. I turned to George saying. "Let's get back home were we can read this in peace without all this lot around." We set off for General Gordon Street and when we got there we finally found out what had been happening whilst we had been enjoying our day in the park.

The French had mobilized as soon as Germany had declared war on Russia. But it seemed that the German plan had always been to attack France first as soon as she came to Russia's aid so it was rather a moot point. But to succeed the Germans would have to move swiftly with their attack on France to have any chance of success, and this meant pushing through neutral Belgium to catch France in the rear and force her to fight on two fronts. The only thing Germany could cite for declaring war on France was that she was 'Fighting for her Life' and the Germans were then trying to shift the blame for war onto French shoulders by laying claim to 'Acts of Hostile Aggression' by the French army. These were just excuses to try and keep us British from aiding the French indeed the

French army had committed no hostile acts and though they were mobilized and ready for action they were still well inside their own border. Would Britain come to France's aid? After all there was the Anglo-French treaty, The Entente Cordiale which pledged mutual assistance should either country be attacked. We went to bed that night and may I say that our tread on the stairs was a heavy one wondering what would happen. I got up in the morning had a quick bite and was off to work I hadn't time to talk to George this morning about what we had read last night. Besides which he was still in bed as I had to be in work by five o'clock while he didn't have to be in while half past seven. All the talk at work when you could hear it was about what the Germans had done. And the general opinion of everybody was that Britain should get involved and give these rotten Germans a bloody nose that would teach them a lesson to mind their manners. And who better to teach them than John Bull didn't Britannia rule the waves, didn't we have an Empire on which the sun never set? Let those Germans watch out for themselves if they riled us.

At bait time a paper appeared from somewhere I was in the moulding shop where I worked when I heard a loud outcry and then someone asked. "What's going on?" Sid Jones who had the paper replied. "Those bastard Germans have invaded Belgium now." There was a paper lad outside the open shop door and Norman Smith the casting shop foreman shouted to out. "Get me a paper off him Billy Boy will you?" I went to get his money and others in the shop were shouting telling me to get one for them so I went to the lad and by the time I had finished he hadn't a paper left. I said to him. "That's a good day's work you've just done it was quick thinking to come to the door and sell your papers." He smiled at me before saying. "I've more to get and sell yet the next edition will already be out." Then with a cheery wave he was off through the yard like a rat up a drainpipe. I walked back into the shop and had just got through the door when I was hit by the clamour of people wanting a paper I handed them out quicker than the paper lad. And everybody seemed happy for those who could read by now had small groups round them of those that couldn't and were reading the stories to them. I had kept one back for myself and went outside to sit on a barrow and have a read somewhere that the temperature wasn't a 120 degrees. I read that the German army had crossed the border at 8-30 this morning and that the Belgium army was resisting their advance nobly but that they had no chance of holding out without help. They were appealing to France, Russia and Great Britain for assistance Britain as well as most other European countries including Germany was committed to Belgium's neutrality. So in Berlin the British Ambassador had delivered an ultimatum to the German Government it read that unless the Germans undertook to remove their troops from Belgium soil by midnight she should consider herself to be at war with Great Britain and her Empire. I shook my head sadly now the cat really was among the pigeons. As I was making my way home to General Gordon Street along my usual route that night there were plenty of people either standing in groups or in pairs outside shops, houses, and on street corners. And they were all taking about what had been going on just that some were more verbal than others. As well as this all along the way home the paper lads tried to out do each other shouting out the latest headlines. And among this vans dashed up and down the streets throwing the latest copies of the newspaper out onto the pavement in front of them.

I bought one off a paper lad on the corner of Coniston Road. I read that the Germans had so far ignored our ultimatum and continued to pour troops over the Belgium border and had continued with their headlong rush across the country. It did not fill me with much hope of them turning round because the silence from the Germans was overwhelming and surely if they wanted peace they would have halted their troops instead of pushing more across the border. I walked on home I had suffered much in my young life and had learned to be hopeful but things looked bleaker than I had ever known them. As I opened the front door I heard a voice coming from the front parlour saying. "OOH I don't know I hope my Jack and Charlie will be all right all this messing going on how are people supposed to carry on I ask you?" As I walked down the hall I heard George Drew reply. "They will be alright Mrs M we will still need troops to defend India." I went in through the door and saw that George was sat in an armchair by the fireplace. Whilst Mrs Moffat was stood with one hand on the top of the centre table whilst the other had sneaked round to the back of her head and was

unconsciously patting the bun there. I walked into the room and said. "Hello all is everything alright?" Ma Moffat answered me saying. "Oh Billy this news is shocking whatever will happen next I wonder?" She moved the hand from the back of her hand and clasped it with the one from the table she now started ringing them together I told her. "It's like George just said Ma Jack and Charlie will be alright they will probably stop in India." He looked across giving me a thoughtful look because although I was pretty young life had dealt me a hand that made me grow up pretty bloody quick and no mistake." George stretched out his hand saying. "Is that the latest paper you've got there?" I handed it to him as I replied. "Yes though there's been no good news up to yet." Ma Moffat told me "I'll put your tea on everyone else has already eaten", and she bustled out of the room but I noticed there was sadness to her movements that hadn't been there before.

I sat down in the armchair across from George and sighed he had the paper up in front of his face I leaned my head back against the chair. The door opened and Mr Domby came into the room. He was another lodger of 123 General Gordon Street and was about forty years old and he worked at the Town Hall. He sat at the table and said. "Hello boys this is a rum do that's going on and no mistake." He took his old briar pipe out of his pocket squinted into the bowl put it into his mouth and blew through it he then took it out placed it on the table and began to search through his pockets for his tobacco pouch. I decided to ask him. "What do you think about what's going on with Germany then Mr Domby?" He held up a hand in a stop gesture he held the tobacco pouch in his other hand and then picking the pipe up off the table he began to fill it with care. Once it was filled he tamped down the tobacco in the bowl and returned the pouch to his pocket all this had been done with the movements of someone who loved a good smoke. He struck a Lucifer match and lit it and then when he got the pipe drawing to his satisfaction and a cloud of blue smoke enveloped him he sighed and lent back in the chair. Taking it out of his mouth he pointed at me with the pipe stem saying. "Well Billy Boy judging by what I have read and heard up to now and weighing everything up. I don't think there's a ghost of a chance that the Germans will answer our ultimatum." He placed the stem back in his mouth and took a deep pull on the pipe as I replied. "So you think there will be a war?" He blew smoke out contentedly and said to me. "A war oh most certainly mores the pity the armies are on the march now my lad and once that has happened it's far too late for talking or anything else." He smiled a rueful smile at me as I heard Gorge say from the other side of the room where he was sat. "Good now we shall know where the country stands there's no longer a question of will we or wont we the question will then be when and I'll tell you what I am going to join up as soon as possible by God I will." His face was flushed and he spoke with all the patriotism and conviction of his eighteen years and of the youth of the country.

'Yes'. Mr Domby informed us. "It's everybody's duty to do what he can for his country at a times like this but there's no need to go rushing about like headless chickens." But by this time George was stood up and the look of exhilaration on his face I don't think he had even heard Mr Domby. I said. "Well I guess I'll be joining up as well then after all we will need all the men we can get to have this over with the soonest." George's mood had captured my spirit and I was as hungry for war as he was. Mr Domby's face had a look of disapproval on it as he said. "Now then Billy Boy I think maybe your a bit to young for the army don't you?" I was incensed by this comment. "If there's a war I want to be in it to do my bit if my friends join up then so will I and nobody will stop me." I was bursting with national pride and there was no way I was being left behind. Mr Domby looked at me rather sadly. "Well it's up to you lad I just thought I should point out what's what to you. I was doing it in your best interest you know." He stared into the bowl of his pipe as though an answer was to be found there. I felt sorry for him as I went on saying. "Thank you very much Sir I appreciate what you have said and know you could only have been thinking of my well being however as I have said I will do my bit for my King and Country." I looked at him and set my jaw as he told me. "Well so be it then Billy Boy and good luck to the pair of you on your undertaking." We both said warmly. "Thank you Mr Domby sir." George stood up and came across the room grabbing my hand and nearly shaking it off as he told me. "Well done Billy Boy when I go to the shop tomorrow I will try to find out what's happening and relay it back here to you." I nodded my head

saying. "I wish we could go now and get on with it and get the Huns sorted out as soon as possible." Mr Dombey stood up from the table and pointed at me with his pipe stem as he said. "Be careful what you wish for in this life my lad." He then turned and walked out of the room leaving us both stood there staring after him and thinking about what he had just told us.

I had just finished my tea and as I walked into the hall on my way back to the front parlour to have a smoke and talk to George I passed the sitting room and heard the other lodgers in there talking in a quite murmur. I was just about to enter the parlour door when there was a knock on the front door and I thought who's calling at this time of night. I got to the door and opened it then in the light from the hallway I saw it was Albert Hall. He said to me. "I just thought I'd pop round and see what you and George were up to what with all this war talk that's going on I thought to myself I bet the lads are following this like a hound dog on a kipper trail and I must admit its bloody exiting even though I do say so myself." Albert or Bert as everybody calls him works with George at Cole's drapery shop. He is nineteen years old tall and swarthy looking with a fine head of hair which is his pride and joy he is also a very dapper dresser. Although he was quite compared to George and was one of the nicest persons that you could meet I quite liked Bert even if he did smell like a sissy with the pomade he wore on his hair and the lilac water he used. I told him. "Come on in Bert were in the front parlour." He stepped inside saying. "Ah I see leaving the old crusts to it in the rear parlour well can't say I blame you for that."

I said. "Go on through." He passed me in a cloud of pomade and lilac water as he went into the front parlour and I followed him into the room as I did this I heard George saying. "Well then Bert how's it fettling me old mate." They were shaking hands as I came into the room he continued. "I hope the dance is on Saturday night because I've an absolute corker of a girl who's coming with me and I want to show her off and I want to try out some dance steps I've just learned on her. Trust George the whole world is on the brink of war and all he can think about is whether or not the church dance will be cancelled. I said. "Sit down Bert and take the weight off your feet and make yourself at home." He sat at the table with on one of the straight back chairs he perched on the edge so as not to crease his jacket and pulled his pants straight so as the creases in them would not fall out. Bert told George. "Well I should think there will be no problem about the dance that is barring an invasion by the Germans." George laughed saying. "Don't even joke about that you never know what these bloody Huns will get up to charging round bloody Belgium like a hound that's chasing its tail it fair gives me the pip and no mistake." George got out his cigarette case and handed it round we all took one and when we had them lit he said. "Listen here Bert me and Billy Boy are going to join the army because this here war is about to kick off and me and Billy Boy want to do our bit before it's all over." He looked at me and I nodded my head in agreement. Bert answered a bit timidly. "Well I'm not right sure about the ins and outs of what's happening." George butted in saying. "You don't need to be." Bert held up his hand as he continued. "Please I know what I'm saying and to tell you the truth I'm not sure about the army you know what they say all the nice girls love a sailor and that would be more in my line." He smiled at us to show he was joking. "Still we can't have these Huns chucking their weight about thinking they own everything and if your mates are going to join the army then that's all there is to it you can count me in after all you wouldn't feel right if you missed a show like this." We all three shook hands together grinning at one another and slapping each other on the back like we had just backed a Derby winner. We will check things out tomorrow in our dinner break and meet here at night to let Billy Boy know what's going on. I took my cigarette packet out of my pocket and offered them round Bert said. "No thanks Billy Boy Id better be going my heads already that full of everything that's happened I want to go home and turn it over alone then get a good nights sleep for the morrow." George turned one down as well saying. "I think Bert's right the best thing we can all do now is get a good night's sleep and be fresh for the morning. I put my packet away and we all shook hands. Bert left saying. "Goodnight all I will see you at work George." I showed him to the door as he turned and patted me on the shoulder. "Well goodnight again Billy Boy and keep your pecker up." And with this last comment he turned and walked down the path and

off to his home I shut the front door and followed George off to bed with a sense of excitement about the coming days.

Chapter Two

The following night Bert came round and we discussed what they had found out that day George said. "We didn't find much out nobody seems to be taking it seriously yet. Apart from a few groups of people outside the Town Hall breaking into bursts of Rule Britannia and God Save the King at the drop of a hat it was pretty quite." Bert joined in. "Yes I couldn't work out what was happening I don't know but I expected more nothing much has changed still the same old Blackthorn." Bert looked really down in the mouth. I knew how he felt all day at work I'd been praying for the end of shift then I could come home and get the news off these two. The excitement I felt the day dreams I'd been having there was I a soldier wearing my uniform and I could think of no one who would wear it with more pride than me. Different scenarios filled my head I was charging the enemy and killing hundreds of them I could see my friends getting killed and wounded but never me. A General was pinning medals on my chest while people looked on in awe of me all these and many more daydreams filled my head yet here I was now hearing nothing had happened. I said to them. "There must be something going on just look what happened in London the crowds gathering outside Buckingham Palace shouting for the King the same crowds cheering when they knew it was war yet up here nothing is happening I bet down there the people are flocking to join up." George told me. "Calm down Billy Boy we all feel the same but something will start happening up here you'll see meanwhile me and Bert will keep our ears and eyes open and let you know what's happening down in the town." We said our goodnights to Bert and went to bed praying for something to happen on the morning. Over the next few weeks nothing at all seemed to happen in Blackthorn but on the streets and in the homes and workplaces across the country people were talking about the stories in the newspapers. These stories told of young Belgium and French soldiers fighting and dying on the roads and in the towns and villages of Belgium. Then there was the killing of babies and the violation of any female who resisted the Hun, also the wholesale looting of anything that was not nailed down. They also carried news that the first contingents of the British Expeditionary Force had landed in France and that more were on their way every day and that they would soon be on the way to show the Germans what was what.

But in Blackthorn at most you saw the odd Territorial soldier or maybe two wearing khaki uniforms that didn't seem to fit too well you'd see them in the pubs with their relatives and friends having a drink before they caught their trains to go and join their units. And you'd see people who used to laugh at them and call them for being in the terriers these same people were now wishing them well and telling them to kill as many 'Huns' as possible and offering to buy them drinks. But these men didn't need anymore drink because they had already had enough and they had to catch their trains. And as all soldiers already know in peace time nobody needs or wants a soldier but come a war and people can't get enough of them. I got home from work and George and Bert were there. They were looking extremely pleased with themselves. George said excitedly. "Guess what we saw today?" I looked at him with pure boredom on my face saying. "I haven't a clue and if it's not about us joining up I don't want to know." Bert butted in telling me. "We only saw one of the first lots of soldiers to leave Blackthorn that's all." Well this was really news I nearly deafened them in my enthusiasm to get them to tell me all about it as George took up the tale. "We heard all this noise outside the shop at about ten o'clock and all of a sudden there were crowds out on the pavement.

Well everybody left the shop and went outside everyone even old Earnshaw the manager and we were asking what's going on?" And this little chap said. "Just wait a minute and you will see." He continued. "Just as me and Bert were going to go back in we heard the faint sound of music getting closer and it was a band drawing nearer and nearer and we could hear people cheering." Bert butted in again. "Then we could see the army band and they had just started playing the British Grenadiers and behind them the soldiers were marching in columns down to the station. The crowd were cheering to the rafter's children and some people were waving flags. As they passed people were pressing cigarettes and flowers to them and a bloke stood with a load of others outside the crown got carried away with patriotic zeal and gave one of the soldiers his pint, to which the soldier quickly sank it and gave back the empty glass to him which the bloke looked at in bemusement."

George took up the tale again. "They looked damned uncomfortable in their new kit and they seemed to be laden down with their new equipment. They had on their ammunition pouches and these along with the stiff straps seemed to bunch up their khaki uniforms. I expected to see them wearing their red coats and smart hats with the brass and silver gleaming and all we got was this dull sombre khaki and hats that looked like a bus conductors with peaks on the front and these were stiff and new and were just perched on top of their heads." George looked dismayed as he remembered this scene. Bert was saying. "It doesn't bother me what we look like as long as we get a chance to go and do our bit after all the way everybody is talking it looks like it will be all over by Christmas and if we don't get a move on were sure to miss out I think being in Berlin for Christmas might be very nice." We again said our goodnights to Bert and went off to bed. Friday I was in work thinking that things were moving too slowly well too slowly for someone of my age that is. The regular army were not faring to well and the soldiers lying dead in the ditches and in the towns and villages were now British. The names of Môn's and Le Cateau were in the papers but despite these same papers saying the Germans were suffering terrible losses it seemed so were we some of the most noble families in Britain had lost their only sons and some others more than one. For this was the regular army fighting and some of the finest of our regiments had been cut to pieces, and now the term minor set-back and straightening out the line seemed a little false. I decided that what we needed was me and I would talk to George when I got home. I would tell him if this town was going to shirk its responsibilities then we would have to go and enlist in another town or even better a city.

That Friday night I walked up the path and opened the front door I was ready to tell George what I had decided to do. But just as I got through the front door before I could do anything I was jumped upon by two lunatics. Laughing and shouting and hugging me and slapping my back. I shouted at them. "Just a minute slow down and tell me what's happened." Before I knew it we had ended up in the front parlour in such a rush my head was spinning as they composed themselves George said to me. "You know Kitchener has asked for a volunteer army?" I nodded my head I knew what he would say next and a clammy feeling came over me I was shaking with joy and had tears in my eyes as I thanked god for giving me what I had prayed for. I heard George say with concern in his voice. "Here sit down its fine he's right now and no mistake just look at the grin on his chops." And having said this Bert's face split into a huge grin as well. After sitting down I felt alright again and so I said. "Listen I'm fine so come on tell me all about it because I never want this feeling to end." George continued. "Well it's like I said Kitchener wants a volunteer army and the Mayor Major Jack Harmon has just had his offer to raise a complete Battalion from the town accepted by the War Office." George took out his cigarette case and offered them round. I felt like I was in seventh heaven all kinds of things were spinning through my mind it was better than holding hands with Helen Shaw or a penny lick on a hot day. George told me. "We bumped into Ted Hughes from the Argos on our way home they had just got the news and he was lugging a crate of ale back to the newspaper office to help celebrate. Here Bert nip out and get the latest edition of the Argos and lets see what's in it." Bert nodded and left the parlour. It was then that I noticed that the rest of the lodgers were in the room and I could feel my face flushing with embarrassment at what they must have thought about our displays of joy and celebration. But as I looked some smiled and some

looked pensive and Mrs Moffat had tears in her eyes but not just for us I think but more for Charlie and Jack her sons who were now fighting in Belgium.

Bert returned with the paper and we all gave a cheer when we saw the headline which said 'Enlist in the Blackthorn Battalion' and under this a by-line Maj. Jack says 'Get Your Gun and Kill the Hun' so we gave this another rousing cheer as well. George said to us. "Stand back wont you and give a fellow some room." He was in danger of a serious injury to his back with everybody leaning on him to glimpse the paper so he said again. "For the love of god stand back and I will read the article to you." Every body moved back at least an inch he took a minute and read it through to himself then he began reading it to us. "Right this is the bit we want they will be enlisting the battalion at the Town Hall on Monday and it will be made up of selected volunteers only. I told them "We must get down there early otherwise we may get left out beat to it by some other lucky so and so." George looked at me with all the disdain of a one eyed Tom cat as he said. "If I may continue without being interrupted it says that there will be fifteen hundred forms of declaration for signing up to the new battalion at the Town Hall so young Billy Boy is right we had better get there early. The three of us looked from one to the other and we must have all been thinking the same thing that there was no way we were going to be numbers fifteen hundred one two and three and that we would be part of the battalion no matter what. The rest of the lodgers wished us good luck the women kissing our cheeks which George enjoyed immensely and the men shaking hands. Mr Domby looked at me with sadness in his eyes and said. "Remember what I said young Billy Boy be careful what you wish for." He then shook my hand as I replied. "I will Mr Domby don't you worry and thank you." He smiled at me and left behind the other lodgers as he went out I looked at Bert and George and we smiled at one another. George handed his fags around as he said. "The Three Musketeers that's us lets just all have a final smoke and then it will be time for bed because I don't know about you but I'm done in." We nodded agreement and then finished our smokes and Bert bade us goodnight and went home and me and George toddled off to bed and I don't know about him but for me my dream was of glory and a hero's home coming.

It was hell over the weekend waiting for Monday to arrive it was like Christmas when you were a child it never seemed to get any closer. I think I got on everybody's nerves moping around with my long face but George knew what I was going through and was the same way himself even if he didn't show it as much as me. But at last just like Christmas Monday morning arrived. I was up and out of bed with the larks I had a wash and shave and was whistling a tune as I did so, I gave George a shake on the way past but he was already awake. He said. "Good morning Billy Boy how did you sleep?" I replied. "I was so excited that I couldn't get to sleep properly I just tossed and turned all night." He swung his legs out of bed saying. "I know I was listening to you all night as it happens." He yawned and stretched as I told him. "I am very sorry if I disturbed you." He smiled and said. "Don't be I probably would have been awake anyway because I'm just as excited as you." He stood up stretching again and then he let out a large yawn. I had dressed carefully in my Sunday best and now I grabbed my best flat cap and shoved it in my jacket pocket saying. "Right Ill nip down stairs and start on our breakfast it could be a long day and we will need something inside us so don't be too long about coming down." George was examining his tongue in the mirror he rolled it back in his mouth and proceeded to make sounds like a hippo smacking its chops together at the thought of a nice fruit salad and on this parting salute I went downstairs. I was making my way towards the kitchen when I met Rosie Mrs Moffats niece who with Beth helped Mrs Moffat run the place.

She said. "Hey up Billy Boy thought I heard you crashing around." Rosie was fourteen but thought she was a lot older and I glared at her as I replied. "I was not crashing around as you put it and anyway what are you doing down here at this time?" She had this cheeky grin on her face as she told me. "I've come to give my hero his last breakfast and to see him off to the fighting." She sighed and then struck a dramatic pose with the back of her hand to her forehead no doubt she had seen some girl in a moving picture do the same. I was not amused and was just going to give her the rough edge of my tongue when I heard Mrs Moffat coming along the passage shouting. "Come on

Rosie my girl let's get this breakfast out for our two adventurers." She came into the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron as she said. "Morning Billy Boy I imagine you're ready for a good breakfast aint you?" I looked at her and smiled then replied. "Ma you shouldn't have bothered at this time of the morning me and George could have got our own bite to eat." Her hands went onto her hips and she told me. "Billy Lamb my name would be mud round here if people heard I hadn't made breakfast for the two of you what let you leave my boarding house not knowing I sent you off with a good start to the day and you going to enlist down the Town Hall this morning, what would people think of me as a landlady?" I said to her. "It doesn't matter what they think it's what everybody here knows you're the best landlady anybody could wish for and that's a fact." I kissed her on top of the head as Rosie started giggling. Ma chastised her saying. "Come on my girl let's get this breakfast started and quick about it there's no time to dawdle." Then she gave her quick clip to the backside on the way past. Then she turned on me and said. "As for you Billy Lamb go and tell that young Mr George Drew that his breakfast is nearly ready and we won't be waiting for him if he doesn't get a move on." I could see a flush to her cheeks and tears in her eyes. So I said. "Straight away Ma I'll make sure he comes down don't you worry."

After a monumental breakfast of eggs, bacon, tea and bread and butter in amounts enough to feed an army after this we set off to meet Bert at the tram stop on Wellington Street. As we neared we could see quite a few blokes waiting for the tram to come and everybody seemed a little nervous. Bert made his way over and we shook hands as he said. "Well this is a turn up it looks like a lot more people had the idea of getting up early." And he glanced round the people waiting as we followed suit we were just looking round when we heard. "Hey up lads!" Coming towards us was Charlie Slater. Charlie lived on Nelson Street the next street over from ours and was an apprentice at Briggs Engineering he was a small stocky chap with ginger hair a snub nose and blue eyes all in all a decent bloke. And on any other day we would have been pleased to see him but this was not an ordinary day and everybody was bristling like a pack of strays fighting over a pork chop. Charlie came up to us saying. "Off to join up then is that it I can't say as I blame you after what I have been reading in the papers I thought to myself Charlie Slater's the one you want for this shooting war I can tell you." He threw the dog end of his cigarette on the floor and ground it under his foot. George looked at him with absolute boredom painted on his face as he said. "We thought we might go down and see what's happening just scan out the lay of the land so to speak." Charlie wasn't to be fooled though and with a malicious grin replied. "Aye happen so but there's a few more doing the same by the look of it." But before any of us could retaliate to what had just been said we heard the rattle and clank of the tram coming. We went and sat on top and Charlie joined us there was little said on the journey into town as the sound from these steel beasts makes it damned nearly impossible to hear what people are talking about. However the tram did get more crowded until as we reached the town it was jammed full. We got off in town at the terminus and made our way to the Town Hall noticing that there was a steady stream of men heading the same way not wanting to be beaten by these we quickened our pace.

We were coming up to the corner of the 'White Lion Hotel' when Bert asked. "What's that noise I can't quite make it out?" I replied. "No I know what you mean it's hard to place it." I cocked my head towards the sound we were still trying to identify it when we turned the corner and nearly ran into the back of some chaps standing there. George turned to these men in front of us and said. "Come on you lot let us past we have some serious business to attend to today." He was answered by. "Push off or I'll give you what for this is the end of the queue and if you want to join it you're behind us." George stated. "Queue what queue!" The man in front looked at George as though he had escaped from a lunatic asylum saying. "If you want to enlist in the new battalion this is the queue you daft bugger or else are you blind." We stepped into the road and just gaped at the sight in front of us all the way to the Town Hall the queue stretched there must have been hundreds in it. My heart sank lower than my boots there were people in it from all walks of life. They were there in their Sunday best or in their office clothes others in their work gear dusty and worn, there were men in blazers and flannels, miners who must have just finished shift and who you couldn't miss because of the blue

scars from the coal dust on their faces. And the noise was astounding that is what we could hear from around the corner the noise of hundreds of people talking to each other or in groups or from group to group. Handing round cigarettes some confident some scared some just standing quietly with their thoughts and above all this a sense of anticipation. While the members of the local constabulary walked up and down the queue keeping order but having some light hearted banter with the crowd as well.

We stepped back onto the pavement and the man in front turned his head and looked at us again. I thought there might be trouble as the men on either side of him had turned their heads as well. George said. "Sorry about before we had no idea this many people were here we thought we had been clever coming here early but we should have known that everybody would think the same way." He turned fully round the other two were looking forward again taking no particular interest any more. He said. "That's alright he said my name is Frank Lord and these are the twins my brothers Jimmy and Mickey. The two turned round and although not exactly identical they were still hard to tell apart George introduced us and we all shook hands. Frank was tall and broad as were Jimmy and Mickey you could see the resemblance in the three of them. Frank was older being twenty one while the twins were nineteen they all had the same dark curly hair and green eyes and all three of them said they worked in Grundy's stone quarry on the outskirts of town. Frank motioned towards the queue with his hand saying. "Well it's certainly a good turn out so far if this keeps up I can't see it taking long to fill the quota." I replied. "I hope there will be room for us I don't fancy going back to the foundry and by god we've a right to fight surely it's not asking too much." Frank looked at me and smiled as he said. "Bloody hell what have we here lads he's a right blood thirsty piece of work and no mistake." I looked back at him sheepishly as he continued. "That's all right lad don't fret about me I reckon we all feel the same as you after all that's why we're here isn't it?" I smiled at him glad that other people felt like me and were as patriotic as the rest of us. It was turning into another glorious day the sun was beginning to get warm now and a lot of people with coats on were removing them draping them over their arms and rolling their shirt sleeves up and our group were no exception. Also the first of the day's traffic was appearing there were coal wagons on their deliveries, milk carts going by buses with solid rubber tyres trundling past, a few motor cars belonging to the classier people. An iron monger's cart went past its clattering pots and pans and other metal accoutrements playing a timpani of sound. A knife grinder rode along on his bike with the stone for sharpening at the front shouting to the crowd he'd sharpen any knives they had so they could kill the Huns quicker. And for a while he was doing a roaring trade before a copper moved him on an action which the crowd up there roundly booed and to which the knife grinder smiled and peddled on his way to a quieter spot.

Meanwhile outside the White Lion Hotel where our part of the crowd was situated a dray wagon full of beer barrels pulled up for a delivery to the hotel. It was drawn by a pair of magnificent Clydesdale horses they were black with white blazes down their foreheads and the horsy smell coming off these huge animals smelt comforting. A cheer went up from the crowd around us and some wag shouted. "Just drop one of those off here and we will make short work of it", at this suggestion a cheer went up again among much laughter from the crowd. The draymen jumped down off the wagon then turned to the crowd and said. "Come on please gentlemen let the dog see the rabbit let's get at the drop no doubt most of you will be wanting a pint of ale later and if we can't do our job and deliver then there won't be any ale." However all this was to no avail as nobody wanted to move and maybe lose their place for the queue at the back of us now stretched as far back as 'Martins Bank'. Two coppers came and moved people out of the way and the beer was finally delivered. The draymen climbed back up on their wagon and the driver shouted. "Good luck to you lads." This got a responsive cheer from the crowd the driver then slapped the reins and the dray pulled away off to the next drop on its rounds the iron rims of its wheels sounding loud on the cobbles as it went. We had been waiting hours and although some people were still skylarking about there were more and more people getting a touch testy in the growing heat of the day as they waited. The queue now stretched from the town hall all the way down Market Street past shops and pubs to

the 'Open Market' and the 'Market Hall' at the end. People had been joining the queue all morning and not just singly there were now four Brass Bands keeping the crowds entertained with there playing. These had come with 'Trade Union' contingents their banners carried high before them I read some of them there was, 'The Mill Workers Union', 'The Engineers and Sheet Metal Workers Union', 'The Allied Trades Union' and the 'Mineworkers Union'. And every time a contingent turned up with its band leading the way a rousing cheer would go up from the crowd in recognition of these men.

I was just looking around me thinking what a site this was and that I wouldn't have missed it for the world when a ripple of noise came from the front and someone said. "There opening the doors in five minutes." It came down the line and was passed on to those behind us and all the way on to the end of the queue. The sense of anticipation now was at breaking point and everybody was as keen as a ferret after a rabbit to get into the hall. I was praying for the five minutes to pass quickly and not keep us there on tenter hooks. Suddenly we heard a huge cheer from up front rippling down towards and then past us to be carried on by those behind. The doors had opened and the time had come! The queue started moving forward and a little chap further in front shouted. "Right lads they don't want anybody with false eyes, arms, or legs so you people need not apply so if your here lets be having you out and leave room for the likes of us fit blokes." Some joker shouted back. "You'd better piss off home then because you've got 'Boss Eyes' and you sken like a barrel of whelks." The little man was quite put out by this statement and said. "Come here and say that I'll show you boss eyed I'll give you such a clout that your eyes will still be rolling in their sockets tomorrow!" This interchange had everybody laughing and cheering around them. A policeman had been listening and came along saying. "Now now less of that save your ire for the Huns if you please." This received another cheer from the crowd the fellow who had been called boss eyed was making his way towards the bloke who had shouted at him and he didn't look happy. The policeman moved into the crowd and put his hand on the little fellows shoulder as he told him. "I meant what I said move another inch that way and I will remove you to the back of the queue." He let the man go and he shuffled back to his place chastened by the threat to remove him which might lead to him missing enlistment in the battalion. We had finally got here and it was our turn we had gone up the steps of the Town Hall that was flanked by policemen. We had walked across the magnificent entrance hall with its high cupola and we now entered through the huge doors of the main chamber inside long tables covered with blankets had been set up facing the doors; we were ushered towards the tables.

The table I stepped up to had a territorial captain and a clerk behind it to my surprise it was Mr Dawson from the foundry the Captain said. "Sit down and smoke if you wish." I was sweating worse than being in the foundry and I felt like I was going to be sick. The last person Id expected to see was Mr Dawson he knew my real age and with one word could put a stop to my dreams of enlistment. The captain lit a cigarette saying. "Well young fellow you certainly look fit and you've got a fine frame just the type we are looking for to enlist today he smiled at me and said.

"Name?"

"Lamb."

"Christian Name?"

"William."

"Age?"

I looked over at Mr Dawson who was writing all this down but he didn't look up and in fact had shown no sign that he recognized who I was.

"Eighteen."

"Religion?"

"Church of England."

"Trade or Profession?"

"Labourer."

He gave me the piece of paper saying. "Right then lad sign this form here and follow the rest out through the side door." He shook my hand and I stood up still in a state of shock that I had made it through. I looked over at Mr Dawson again and this time he smiled at me. I had tears in my eyes and I was sure I would never be able to show the gratitude I owed him at this minute for allowing my dreams to come true. He must have sensed something of this because he said. "Through the side door and be quick about there's lots more have to be seen today." I turned and made my way through the side door where George and all the others Bert, Charlie and the Lord Brothers waited to congratulate me.

George said to me. "Well done Billy Boy." Frank Lord looked at me with a grin on his face. "Bloody hell I thought you were going to faint when I looked over at you white as a sheet you were and your face looked a rite picture." Frank had been at the table next to mine as I replied to him. "I nearly did faint old Dawson knows all about me I have known him since I started at the foundry." Frank smiled saying. "I take it you are not of the proper age to enlist legally." I told him. "No I'm only fifteen and old Dawson knew it but he didn't say anything to the officer." George said. 'Well good old Mr Dawson we will thank him properly later and bye him a pint or two', he was just about to add something else when we heard a uniformed Sergeant shouting. "Come on you lot stop flapping your gums and get in line and don't take all day about it." We lined up in the room as he told us. "Right you lot through the door on your left and across the yard, and into Queens Hall for your medicals let's have no messing around from you get a move on now!"

We walked across the yard and Charlie said. "God I hope I haven't got flat feet or something." We looked at him but before we got chance to answer a corporal ushered us through a side door and into the Queens Hall. As we entered there were Hessian covered booths set out all the way down one side of the hall. These were manned by civilian doctors and we formed in a line to move down each booth in turn. I followed Bert into the first booth after he had been seen and the doctor tapped then slapped my chest and back then he said. "Breath in, now out, and again." I did as I was told as he listened to my chest as he finished he told me. "Move to the next booth." In the next one along the doctor said. "Drop your trousers." I looked at him shocked by what he had said until with some impatience he said it again. "What are you waiting for come on drop your trousers I haven't got all day?" Seeing as I had no option and not without a little trepidation I did as I was told. His hands went down my underpants which shocked me to the core then much to my amazement he cupped my balls and said. "Cough", which I did then he said. "Cough again", I did as he said as he finished saying. "OK pull your trousers up and go to the next booth." I did so thinking this was a strange way to run an army as in the next booth the doctor said. "Bend down and touch your toes." I did as asked and he told me. "Well done youngun there's a few been through and I dare say more to come who can't do that without bending at the knee right on you go." I went to the next one in line the doctor examined my legs and feet asking. "Do your feet ever give you trouble at all?" I replied. "No never." So he said. "Good then onward and upward" and he pointed me along the line. This went on till they had checked everything remaining heart, eyes, teeth, weight, ears and made sure as well as they could that our insides were working properly. When we were finished the ones who had passed the medical were directed to another room at the back of the hall. The ones who had failed were shown through the front doors. And I am glad to say that everybody from our little group got through. We were shown into a large room at the back of the hall and another sergeant handed bibles out to us saying. "Right those without a bible join someone with one come on three or four to a bible we haven't got all day let's get you sworn in." The Lord Brothers shared a bible and the four of us shared one too as the Sergeant said. "Wait there a minute." He disappeared into a small room on one side and reappeared a few minutes later with a major who looked at us and said. "Alright place your right hands on the bible good now repeat after me."

'I swear'

'I swear'

'To serve His Majesty the King'

'To serve His Majesty the King'

'His Heirs and Successors and the Generals and Officers set over me by His Majesty the King His Heirs and Successors, So Help Me God!'

'So Help Me God!'

'Now kiss the book'.

We did this and the officer went back to whatever he had been doing in the little room and the bibles were collected ready for the next batch of men who would proceed through the ceremony. The Sergeant shouted. "Over here in a straight line in front of the table." He then proceeded to give each of us a brand new shiny shilling with this he also gave us a piece of paper with a set of numbers written on each one saying. "That's your army number learn it and don't ever bloody forget it if you knows what's good for you."

We all formed up again in the room and the sergeant looked at us and said. "Right off you go then out through the door to your right and get a move on as the next lot will be here in a minute. George asked him. "Go where Sergeant?" He shrugged saying. "You can go to hell as far as I'm concerned or home or work I aint bothered just go. Frank Lord said. "I thought wed be in straight away don't they want us?" The Sergeant who was a bit exasperated now turned to us as he replied. "Don't worry they will when their ready and things are in place you're signed up now and they won't forget when the time is right word will be sent to you so until then off you go." So rather mixed up we went out the door and home. Over the next week or so we waited and fretted for our call up papers to arrive. We had signed up took the Kings shilling and were still waiting for something to happen. We had read in the Argos that between Sept 14th and Sept 20th the battalion had reached the strength of 36 officers and 1,076 other ranks. But in a later edition it was told that so many had volunteered that enough men for a reserve company had been recruited and this fetched the battalion up to the full strength of 1500, We had been designated the 4th (service) battalion (Blackthorn) East Lancashire Regiment. It wasn't easy for young chaps like us to wait around everything in the town went on pretty much the same as before wed enlisted. Somehow we thought everything would be different but the only noticeable thing was that anything vaguely German was now taboo and very unpatriotic. Just when I thought we were going to spend the rest of the war sitting on our backsides. The summons arrived for both me and George telling us to report to the Drill Hall on Peel Street at 8 o'clock the next morning. George said. "Is this it just one flimsy sheet of paper there are no instructions on it you'd think it might tell you what clothing to pack. But this just a couple of sentences not so much as a by your leave what a disappointment this is to be sure." Then he threw his summons on the table in the front parlour. I said "It will be alright George we'll see what everybody else thinks about it when they get here."

By nine 'o'clock the front parlour was rather full there was a flog of tobacco smoke you could cut with a knife. Bert and Charlie had turned up and a short time later the Lord Brothers arrived. Even Mr Dombey had come in and plonked himself down in one of the armchairs with his pipe. We had discussed the summonses between us and we had all decided to take the minimum of clothing and such better to little than to much and we could always send for anything else we may need. Our little band sat around in companionable silence I had picked up the Argos and was looking at all the advertisements that had suddenly appeared. I spoke up and said. "This papers full of advertisements all geared towards soldiers now just listen to some of these." I began to read out some of the more obvious ones. "Bennow's soldier's corn plasters for your worn feet. Jennings military tailors the best uniforms in town." George said. "That's the first I've heard of them being a military tailor." I continued. "Bloody hell there's even one for the winter warmer hip flask a must for all officers and there's loads more selling all sorts of things, bloody hell if you'd to carry everything this lot want to sell you you'd need a pack horse." I looked up from the paper at my friends as Mr Dombey pointed with his pipe stem and said. "Don't take it to heart it's always been the same when a war comes along it's a big business in the olden days they probably advertised bow strings like this, put a twang in your bow with Strang's strings'. The whole room burst out laughing with George saying. "That was priceless Mr D." Old Dombey stood up and said to us. "Well I'm for bed it will be a big day for you lot tomorrow so good night to you and good luck just in case I don't see you", he then left the

room. Frank Lord stood as well saying. "Yes I think it's time we all got going like Mr Domby said tomorrow will be a big day." We showed everybody out and at the door they all chorused. "See you at the Drill Hall in the morning". Then they walked off down the path we shut the front door locked up and took ourselves off to bed to get an early night all the better to be up early in the morning.

Chapter Three

In the morning we bade our farewells to the rest of the lodgers in the boarding house receiving hand shakes from the men and kisses from the women Mr Domby was not present though and I thought this strange but he had wished us good luck last night. We had packed our shaving gear and some spare shirts and underwear in our small cases and we would send for anything else we may need when we found more out. Then the time came to go and Mrs Moffat and both Beth and Rosie kissed us on the cheeks and stepped back. Mrs Moffat said. "Now don't you be doing anything daft, and look out for each other and don't forget there will always be a place here for you." She shoved parcels with sandwiches in them into our hands. The tears were streaming down her face and she was dabbing at them with the corner of her apron. And both George and I both had tears in our eyes as well as I said. "It's alright Ma well be careful and well write to you and let you know how were getting on." I kissed her on the cheek as she told me. "Make sure you do and don't go forgetting your friends here or your family." She smothered me in her large bosom and then kissed me on the forehead as I then said. "How could we forget you and the rest of the people here as you are just like family?" She then kissed George on the cheek saying. "Go on be off with you or you'll be late on your first day and the army would probably blame me for that as well still there could be a surprise there that you don't yet know of. We looked at her surprised at what she had said but she said nothing else so we forgot about it as we turned for the door and both said. "Goodbye Ma." We walked down the hall and then just as we neared the front door I heard footsteps behind us so I turned and Rosie rushed up to me and kissed me on the lips and said. "You be careful Billy Boy don't you let anything bad happen." I teased her by asking. "Why would you be bothered if it did?" She replied "Oh yes I don't think I could bear it if anything happened to you." I smiled at her and I was touched by the concern in her eyes which were wet with tears so I told her. "I'll write to you Rosie to let you know I'm still alright." I looked into her eyes and saw something in them I'd never seen before. She'd always been cheeky happy go lucky Rosie but now in her eyes I saw the vulnerable side to her and the child that was hiding inside she clung to me for a moment saying. "I'll reply to every letter and I'll look forward to getting them." She let go of me and I turned and caught up to George who was waiting at the front door.

We arrived at the Drill Hall on Peel Street to find it packed with men and as we moved through them a voice shouted. "Over here lads be quick." We looked over and saw that it was Bert, Charlie and the Lord Brothers over on one side of the Hall we went over and to them and shook hands. Frank Lord said. "This looks a rum do and no mistake if they pack anymore in here well be like bloody sardines." I looked round the Hall and saw a few familiar faces I was just about to turn back to the lads when I noticed a couple of the toughs who were arrested outside the park a few weeks ago. I was puzzled as to why they would have enlisted but I got no further in my thoughts because just then someone blew a whistle which shrilled round the Drill Hall and got everyone's attention. Then I heard George Drew exclaim. "Bloody hell it's Mr D of all people!" I looked and saw he was right Mr Domby in full uniform with sergeant's stripes on the sleeves and two rows of bright coloured ribbons on his chest. You could have knocked me down with a feather, and I stood there with my moth opening and closing like a demented cod fish. George continued saying. "No wonder he wasn't there this morning to say good bye and no wonder Mrs M made that remark about surprises there both a set of dark horses and no mistake." George looked across at me but I was still

in shock. It was Frank Lord who said. "He might be a dark horse but he's also brave with it see that red white and blue ribbon in the middle that's the Military Medal and it's only awarded for bravery in the field so we know now that he's no pen pusher or other such type who never sees action." I now looked at Mr Domby with an even greater respect as I thought to myself not once had he ever mentioned being in the army let alone being decorated for bravery although it was obvious that Mrs Moffat knew. Then I thought what he must have thought about us lot jumping up and down at the prospect of war and suddenly what he'd said and pointed out to us started to make sense. But there was not time for any more thinking as Sgt Domby barked out. "Right you lot come on get into line your soldiers now so stop acting like bloody civilians and get your finger out." A couple of corporals were shoving people into line further down as the Sergeant said. "Now then listen up the Commanding Officer wants a word with you so stop shuffling your feet up and down and keep your traps shut and your ears open. I want to see you stood at ease with your feet apart and your hands clasped behind your back. And do try to look like soldiers even if some of you will never be military as long as you've a hole in your arse."

Up onto the stage stepped Major Jack Harrmon who was now a Colonel and who said. "It's good to see you all here and it makes me extremely proud that so many of you have volunteered and that we have raised a battalion so quickly." He coughed and cleared his throat before he continued. "However at the moment we have no equipment and it may be a while before we get any." A moan went up from the crowd. Sgt Domby growled. "Quite in the ranks." Colonel Jack responded by saying. "I know how disappointed you must all feel but at the moment the War Office are using all the equipment they have to fetch the Regular Battalions up to scratch. But we will receive equipment as soon as it becomes available. And make no mistake we are needed and wanted so don't let this little set back sap you're moral." He paused and ran his eyes over everyone in the Hall and we seemed to grow taller as his gaze swept over us. He went on to tell us. "Now until the War Office manages to take over we will be responsible for your training organization and administration until everything is up and running. Just remember that you are the finest volunteers from the town and surrounding areas be proud of your self's and of your Battalion. You can believe me when I say that I am prouder of you than any body of men I have ever commanded." We gave him a rousing cheer and felt immensely proud ourselves as the Colonel continued. "So what we have to do is to shape you from a crowd of civilians into a fighting Battalion and that is the job we have set ourselves all you need to do is give us a chance and with your help we will succeed. I will now hand you over to the Adjutant to carry on with your induction. So good luck and I hope to get to know each and every one of you in the days to come." Captain Melstone who had been in the Territorial's for a while and was now Adjutant stepped up he was good looking like most of his family for he was the eldest son of Jeremiah Melstone who owned Melstone's brewery. He was tall and slim and fair of hair and complexion and he now said. "Can I have your attention please would you listen to these names?" And he proceeded to read out a list of officers who had just been gazetted then he went on to read out a list of men who had been given N.C.O. rank. Most of these men had no chevrons or other badges of rank and only a few were dressed in uniform the rest were in civilian clothes so for the moment it was necessary to learn their names.

When he had finished reading all the names tables were set up in front of the stage and officers and NCO started crowding round them. They started making lists of companies, of platoons and sections, lists of stores and equipment indeed lists for everything. Whilst we stood around in groups itching to find out what was happening and feeling a little disenchanted by the situation until we were finally told that they were ready to form Companies. Sgt Domby came up to us and said. "Alright lads I've got you all in to B Company that way you'll all be able to stay together and not be split up all over the place. This was great and I smiled at him saying. "Thank you Sgt Domby we all really appreciate you doing that for us." He stared back at us and then told us. "Alright get over to the B Company table over there on the right hand side" At first it was Pandemonium with people milling about searching for their Companies and looking a bit disoriented. We managed to make our way through the crowd over to the B Company table. There we saw Gerald Thornley who was an

under manager at Grundy's Quarry and was now our Company Commander we found out that Sgt Dombly was Company Sergeant. Then there was Walter Cole the son of Mr Cole who owned Coles drapery shop where George and Bert worked and he was now a newly commissioned lieutenant and he looked more like a school boy than ever with his downy cheeks and a lost look on his face. There was John Pearson who worked at the foundry who was dark skinned dark haired and as strong as an Ox. Also there was Fred Hesketh who was tall with blonde hair and who worked down the Main Post Office. And on the edge of the Company stood two toughs who nobody amongst our lot seemed to recognise although I thought I had seen them before. Captain Thornely said. "Right lads as things stand at the moment and while things are sorted out those of you who live at home will have to carry on living there. Those who come from outlying areas will be found billets in the town. You will receive 21 shillings per week pay but part of this will be made up of a billeting allowance." He paused for a moment whilst we took this news in before continuing. "We will train every day, and until we receive uniforms I'm afraid we will have to train in civilian clothing. Now I will turn you over to Sergeant Dombly he will give you the information you need on the training to be carried out in future. But first I wish to thank you for volunteering and to ask you to be patient and lets all pull together and make B Company the best in the Battalion right then I will see you in the morning." And with this he turned and walked away leaving us pondering what he had just said.

Sergeant Dombly took over and said to us. "I want to see you tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock here at the Drill Hall we will then march to the large yard at the rear of Melstones Brewery where we will practice drill and manoeuvres right then you shower dismissed." We broke up and made our way towards the exit where the men from the other Companies were already streaming through. We said good bye to the rest of the gang and told them we would meet them here in the morning. Then George and I went home to General Gordon Street. We went in through the front door as we got in we could see Beth and Rosie doing the dusting in the hall way Rosie saw us and asked. "Have you come back to pick up some clothes then?" Beth joined in whilst she flicked her duster over the hall stand saying. "What's it like being in the army?" I had just finished saying. "Where's Ma Rosie." Then before I could say another word a voice shouted. "Rosie who are you nattering with I want that dusting finished today my girl there's lots more work to be done around here and gossiping wont get it finished any quicker." Rosie was quick to defend herself and said. "But Ma Billy Boy and George are here and they want to see you." Mrs Moffat came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her piny and saying. "Whatever is the matter there's nothing happened has there?" I reassured her as I told her. "No everything is fine Ma but is it alright if we stay here until everything is sorted out." We went on to explain what had been said to us down at the Drill Hall and then Ma smiled saying to us. "Don't you worry boys the rooms yours for as long as you need it." I replied. "Thanks Ma you don't know what that means to us and what a weight it is off our shoulders. George added his own comment saying. "You're a trooper Mrs M I can't thank you enough both for me and Billy Boy." Mrs Moffat looked at us with matronly kindness then said. "Better go up and put your things away then come back down and we'll have tea in the parlour you can tell us about everything that has happened today."

The next morning we arrived at the Drill Hall at 8 o'clock and we had just said our good mornings when we were chased into line by the sergeants and corporals then we were marched in a shambling gait down to the yard at Melstone's brewery. Where we were introduced to the complications and niceties of close order drill and what a pleasure that was. There were just B and D Companies using the Peel Street Drill Hall and the Brewery yard the rest of the battalion had been distributed about amongst other Drill Halls and other practice grounds for their drill and instruction. Over the next few weeks the training went on a pace there were lectures in the Drill Hall given by Officers and NCOs. These covered many different subjects from the digging of trenches to Advanced and Flank Guards and the Adjutant Capt Melstone gave a talk on the History of the British Army which went down very well with the lads. In early October Charlie came rushing into the Drill Hall bursting with news and shouting. "I've just watched these boxes arrive and be off loaded I asked Cpl Harding if they were uniforms. He said no but they are rifles so I scooted back here to let

you know.” We all gave a cheer and a general hubbub began with people chatting and speculating about this event. George said. “Now we can get on with things no more messing around with broom handles. We will be able to get some firing practice in and show how good we can be with the right equipment.” Frank Lord joined in saying. “Not to mention we can get in some bayonet practice”, and he mimed stabbing with a rifle and bayonet.

The Sergeants and Corporals came in and started shouting. “Get on parade, come on get in line you lot bloody hell a load of kiddies could do better.” We arranged ourselves into parade order as Sgt Dobby shouted. “Attention Officer on parade.” Captain Thornley stepped in front of the parade and said. “Stand at ease! Stand Easy! Right I thought I’d impart to you the news although no doubt you already know that we have received a consignment of rifles.” A cheer went up from the formation. Once more Sgt Dobby shouted. “Quite in the ranks.” The Captain smiled before informing us. “Before you get too excited these rifles we have received are out dated Lee Metfords and they will be used for drill only.” A sound like a balloon deflating came from all the assembled men as the Captain continued. “I know you’re disappointed but we must make the best job we can with the tools we are given until the proper ones come along.” And with this last comment on the subject Capt Thornley dismissed us to our duties. You could find us most days practising our drill on the Brewery Yard although the drill at this time was not always as smooth as it might be. With the arrival of the rifles a new element to our drill had been added there was also the fact that we were raw recruits who knew nothing about the mysteries of the Army Drill Manual this meant that we had to take things slow at first and of course there were some mistakes. But I am convinced that no one else would have been able to match the enthusiasm or learned the movements better or quicker than us. Still at first we were plagued by women and young girls laughing and giggling at every little mistake and the sneers and jeers of idle men who had been rejected by the Battalion, and who turned up to watch us drill. At other times we would be asked to march through the town and districts to show off the skills we had learned. And there were always the route marches out into the country side that would go on for miles these were used to get us fit and to toughen us up from the soft civilians that we had been.

Towards the end of October we were issued uniforms, however they were not the khaki uniforms of the territorial and regulars. But were cheap cotton affairs that were made out of a blue sort of material and that made us look like something out of the Fire Brigade. And believe you me there were a few choice words going round about what fool thought about giving us these bits of rag and turning us into a laughing stock. Because along with the uniforms came a tam o shanter type of hat that when worn looked like a saucepan lid stuck on top of our heads it was also made of wool so that when it rained it soaked up water like a sponge and hung down one side with the weight of about half a stone. Also about this time Lt. Cole gathered the Company together one morning he stood on the stage and related a piece of news to us that we had all been waiting for as he said. “Well men the time has come at last for us to bring the Battalion together. Because although training as it has been as gone as well as could be expected under the circumstances we need at this stage to be training as a full Battalion. So to this end we are moving to the North of the County to a camp at Weatherington where our training will become more intense and more specialized.” An excited buzz of conversation started up in the ranks. Then Sgt Wallace barked at us. “Quite in the ranks, stop your lips flapping and listen to what Mr Cole has to say”, he glared at us and his face was bright red. Lt Cole coughed and then continued saying. “I know you’re all excited about the news but a lot of work needs to be done before we move at the end of the week. The Advance Party is already there making things ready for us to move up there and from what I hear things are going splendidly. But now it’s our turn to get things ready from this end so let’s get on with what we have to do and let’s do it well.” He looked over all of us his young face wet with perspiration and still he seemed more than a tad nervous as he told us. “The Sergeants will read out the lists of the fatigues and duties that have been assigned to you. I know you will carry out the tasks given to you with a stout heart and to the best of your abilities.” He left the stage and the Sergeants and Corporals started reading the names they wanted from their lists.

On Saturday we once more bade farewell to Mrs Moffat, Rosie and Beth and the lodgers of 123 General Gordon Street. We had only just found out that Sgt Domby had gone with the Advance Party and we now found out he had already made his farewells to Ma and the rest. Knowing that he'd be seeing us he hadn't bothered taking our leave. As we prepared to leave there were more tears from the women and we felt them in our heart even more because this time we knew we would not be back to live at home which was what had happened before. But eventually we managed to get away but only after promising that we would spend any leave we got in Britain with them. This would be an easy promise to keep as after all they were the only family we really knew. At the Drill Hall we were formed up into our two Companies and we set off for the Brewery Yard. There we met up with the other Companies and now with the full Battalion on parade we stepped off with the Brewery Band leading us in front. As we marched through the town to the railway station we were cheered all the way by the crowds that lined the route. Presents of cigarettes and food were pressed on us as we marched along and all the way as the band wheezed out some of the old favourites the cheering and the singing never stopped. We arrived at the railway station where speeches were given by the new Mayor because Col Jack had to stand down and give up his office when he joined the colours again. And other Dignitaries gave speeches as well there were prayers from some dilapidated Bishop and then we and the crowd sang the National Anthem. The first of the Battalion started to move into the station and then when our turn came we got on the platform and it was chaos the train was ready for boarding and friends and relatives of our men were there. Mr Melstone the Brewery owner was seeing off his son the Adjutant who was travelling on our train. Mr and Mrs Cole were also there to see off their son Walter and at the moment he was crushed to his mother's bosom and in danger of suffocating while the tears streamed down her face. Rosie and Beth had come down along with Helen and they were all crying and dabbing their eyes with their hankies. Capt Thornley was saying good bye to his wife and young children. And the Lord Brothers family were there as well as Bert and Charlie's. And then it was time to board and after the final hugs and kisses we were eventually all in and to the band playing and the crowd singing "*We don't want to loose you but we think you should go*" we pulled out of the station. We crowded the windows of the carriages to catch a final glimpse of something familiar and more than a few people had tears in their eyes and the thought when will we be back.

The train journey was quite pleasant apart from being a bit squashed the country side looked beautiful and I had only been on a train once before. The smell of the steam and smoke from the engine brought back the memory of when I left Heskett village to come to Blackthorn. And I wondered how my uncle and his family were getting on there. George ever the comic said. "What's up Billy Boy are you missing Helen or maybe it's Rosie I can never tell with you?" I shot him a black look and replied. "Where not all like you George Drew some of us think about other things we don't have one track minds." He looked at me crestfallen and said. "Well pardon me for breathing I'm sure." Frank Lord joined in saying to George. "Leave the lad alone we are nearly at the place now and I'm sure we will have other things to think of quite soon." We pulled into Wetherington railway station and the autumn afternoon was quite mild with a watery sun shining. Outside the railway station there were carts drawn up and some motor transport. We were instructed to put our kit on to the carts and then form up again. Captain Thornley addressed us. "Right lads listen up it's a brisk five mile march to the camp, and the sooner we get started the sooner we get there and as an added bonus our little stroll will give you an appetite for the meal that's been prepared for you, take over Sergeant Wallace and get them moving." We moved off in column of fours and as we marched out of Wetherington the orders were barked out. "Pick up the step. Come on you lazy buggers cant you place one foot in front of the other. Let's have some pride in your marching, do you think your on holiday ambling along like you are. Well I can tell you your not, so get your finger out. Left right, left right, left right, left." Somebody started a song at the back of the ranks and soon everybody was joining in even the officers and it sped us on our way with a good heart.

As we approached the camp we saw the moor land it was built on was completely open to the elements there was not a tree to be seen just a few scruffy gorse bushes every now and again, and already a bit of a breeze had got up and was blowing across with nothing to stop it. This did not bode well for winter if we were here that long marching up we could now see the wire fence surrounding the camp and the wooden huts on the inside. We could see some of the Advance Party working on a few of the huts and although we had been told that the territorials had used it for their summer camps it seemed that not all of it had been kept in good repair. Frank Lord said from the side of his mouth. "Well this looks bleak my lads I don't see much chance of a good night out round here do you?" We nodded our heads in silent agreement because I don't think any of us were prepared for a camp in the middle of nowhere. I think we had all dreamed of it being in a town with pubs and girls and other distractions for when we got time off. This place had really rammed it home that we were in the army proper now and God help us. The trouble was that whilst we had been living at home people had regarded us as heroes for having volunteered, and had treated us very well as defenders of the Country. We were used to people buying us drinks, the likes of George and Bert had girls hanging on their every word. We were the 'Cock of the Walk' and we didn't mind milking it to the full. But now all that was gone and it was 'Time to Pay the Piper' and for the majority of us this was like being kicked up the ass with a pit boot. We marched through the camp gates and down the road where we were halted in front of the Battalion Headquarters and told to stand easy. We looked around us at the rows of huts radiating off from the Headquarters building. Behind us was a large expanse of land on which stood the wagons with our kit on them they had passed us on the road and this spare land was obviously the parade ground. Off on one side stood a flag pole and the Union Flag flew jauntily from the top of it. George pretty much summed it up as he said. "Is this it, is this everything, my god it's the back of beyond", he looked crest-fallen no doubt he had been dreaming about what a big hit he would be with the girls up here and this place had taken the wind right out of his sails.

A Corporal came out of the guardroom and told all the NCOs to come inside for instruction then about quarter of an hour later they came back out and we were marched off in different directions. We turned left and marched down a side road to the bottom end of the camp. Here we were assigned to huts our hut was no 43 and we were fell out with instructions to find a bed inside and stow our kit. The Sgt in charge turned to us and said. "You're lucky the other huts have 30 men to a hut yours is the smallest and only has twenty." As we entered we saw he was right there were 10 beds to each side with tables running down the middle of the hut a large cast iron stove stood in the centre. The wooden floor boards squeaked like a startled mouse when you stood on them at the bottom end was a room by itself this was for the hut corporal to sleep in. There were a lot of buckets in the hut buckets for coal, for ash and for food slops we needed the slop bucket because in bad weather we had to eat our meals in the hut. Otherwise tables were set up in the open air outside the cook-house. Charlie patted the big black stove saying. "This is alright I can go and beg some bread from the cook-house for us Frank you get a fire started in the stove there's some coal in the bucket, and we'll have some toast." A voice came from the door shouted. "Don't you dare light a fire in that stove until you are given permission there's set times for lighting them as per regulations? So just you hang fast until you're instructed otherwise don't you know there's a war on and we can't have you being too warm it might turn you soft and then where would we be." It was Cpl Kenny standing in the doorway who said this and he continued. "I've been assigned as hut Cpl so any problems you get come and see me and ill try to sort them out." Kenny was another one we used to laugh at when he was in the territorial's but they had come into their own now and we weren't laughing anymore at them. He looked us over and then took a tour of the hut before he said. "Right get off down the cook-house for your evening meal and don't dawdle about if you miss this meal that's it till breakfast tomorrow and you'll go hungry till then." We made off down to the cook-house carrying our mess tins and utensils with us. We looked around on the way there and saw some more huts like Battalion HQ with the verandas on the front and we noticed that one of these was our company office. There were quite a few other men walking down and Bert said. "Look at this lot if the whole battalions here we'll never get fed." But when we arrived we found out that we would be fed in shifts from now on and we were in the last shift. So we went up with our mess tins and got boiled mutton potatoes and

peas, and a mug of strong tea which went down well. Gorge poked about in his mess tin as in a dismayed voice he said. "The muttuns not right well cooked, and the peas are as hard as bullets". Frank had just finished his final potato and replied. "That's the way it goes in the army I suppose." I joined in saying. "At least it's a meal, and the teas pretty good", and I took a slurp just to confirm this. We finished up washed our things and sauntered back to the hut where we sat outside talking and smoking until it was turning dark. We went into the hut and I think nearly everyone got into bed straight away and was asleep almost immediately so we didn't hear Cpl Kenny calling lights out and then having to come round himself and turn the storm lanterns off.

The next morning reveille sounded at five thirty and we struggled out of bed and then Frank and I made our way to the ablution huts. And even though we had got up and out straight away there was still a queue for both the latrines and the washing hut. The cold water certainly blew any cobwebs that were left from us but shaving in cold water wasn't as bad for me as my whiskers weren't so tough but poor Frank had nicked his face all over. We got back to the hut where Frank proceeded to tear paper into tiny bits and stick them on the nicks on his face to stop the bleeding having done this he looked like some kind of new music hall act. The hut was stirring to life now and Bert asked. "What happened to you?" Frank replied. "There's only cold water to wash and shave in and if I was you lot I'd get a move on because the que's are growing by the minute." Charlie came over to us saying. "Cold water and queues what kind of a set up are they running in this place?" Frank looked at Charlie as though he was soft in the head before saying to him. "You'd best get used to it because you're in the army now not at home there's no mummy to help you here I can tell you." Then he turned to his two brothers Jimmy and Mickey and said. "You two had better get a move on as well or you'll miss your breakfast." And at this point there was a mad scramble to the door by the ones who hadn't done their ablutions yet which was the biggest part of the hut. Me and Frank sauntered down the cook-house where we breakfasted on porridge, bread and jam and hot tea, which we both agreed would get us off to a fine start this morning. The rest got there late and all they got was the burned porridge out of the bottom of the Dixie's, stewed tea and no bread or jam. And despite all efforts to the contrary this happened every morning for as long as we were at the camp, it was a case of the ones who would get up and the ones who would try to get five minutes more kip. In the time we were there you would have thought these people may have learned from their mistakes but they never did. Our company was mustered on parade and the duties and fatigues for the day were dished out between us and this became the routine for the rest of our stay. Suddenly we were thrust into things like cook-house fatigues, this amounted to peeling, cleaning and chopping a mountain of potatoes, pan-bash the cleaning and scrubbing of the pots, pans, Dixie's and utensils used by the cooks. Cleaning out the latrines (the least said about this fatigue the better). There were mountains of supplies to load and unload, and then carried to where they were wanted or to be stored. On top of all this there were the inspections, hut inspections, kit inspections, inspections of the cook-house, all kinds of inspections. And as well as all this training still had to be got on with so there was never a spare minute hardly to yourselves. All this was a revelation and a huge shock to the people who had lived at home or in lodgings like me. Because we had hardly noticed that this type of work existed. Before this mothers, sisters and landladies had done this menial type of work and I think quite a few people beside myself were taken aback by the amount of work that this took.

Two days later the battalion was mustered on the parade ground at mid-morning facing us stood on the veranda of HQ was Colonel Jack and the rest of the officers of the battalion with them were a handful of other officers who we didn't recognise and even another Colonel. The whole of the battalion was focused on the group stood on the veranda and not a sound or movement came from the ranks as we waited. Colonel Jack stepped forward coughed and said. "Now lads I know we've been together since the first day at the Town Hall, and that it was my idea to raise the battalion." He looked out across the battalion as he spoke and it was as if he was speaking to each one of us individually this was a knack he had as he carried on saying. "Let me give you the good news first, enough men have now enlisted to raise a second battalion which as soon as possible will start training." There came a rousing cheer from the ranks this was good news for now with another

battalion there would be somebody to compare our selves with. We were glad also for the ones who had looked so dejected and who didn't get into this first and special battalion for after all we were the pick of the crop. The Colonel spoke continued. "The bad news is that I will no longer be in command of the battalion an audible gasp of horror came from all of us. Sgt Domby shouted. "Quite in the ranks!" Colonel Jack said. "I know you feel bad and disappointed but don't be I am handing you over to Colonel Terry. Up to last year he was a regular officer with the Lancashire Fusiliers so he and his hand picked staff will take you on from here. If I may I will now let him introduce himself to you." The Colonel who we had first seen and who had been stood to one side stepped forward he looked over us with a professional eye before he said. "Colonel Harmon has told me what an eager bunch you are and that you are the pick of the bunch from the enlistment crop. That may be so and I hope it is, but from now on the training will increase dramatically to get you up to scratch to go and fight the Hun." As he talked I had noticed with a bit of a shock that his left hand was missing and that he had a hook in place of it as he continued saying. "As you know things haven't been going all that well for us and our allies at the moment, we need every man we can get to join the fight, and you are some of those men." With his hooked hand he gestured towards the new group of officers and NCOs and informed us. "To this end there will be some changes to the battalion command structure the Officers and NCOs you see here will be responsible for stepping up your training. They have all been regular army and have fought in numerous campaigns and battles in fact some of them are just back from Belgium and fighting the Hun some have wounded but now they are recovered." He looked over at them before he said. "I think you and I are extremely lucky to have them with us and that they can only be an asset to the battalion, and the best people for your training." Then he held his hooked hand above his head and told us. "Don't worry about this and he waved it in the air, this was a present from 'Brother Boer' in the South African Campaign. And it doesn't affect what I can do in anyway so don't be thinking you've been landed with an invalid in charge of you." Then he said. "That's it for now I hope over the coming weeks that I will be able to get to know some of you better and hopefully I will make this the best battalion that I can. So let's all pull together do our bit and see this thing through to the end and that will be when we defeat the Hun." He saluted and stood back and then Col. Jack stepped forward again saying. "Thank you Col. Terry, well lads the time has come to say good-bye and to reiterate what I have said before and that is you are a fine a set of men as I have ever seen. I can only echo what has been said that you knuckle down and make me and the town proud of you and this I am sure you will do", and with this Col. Jack saluted us. Sgt Domby called the parade to attention and shouted. "Three cheers for Col. Jack, hip hip hooray, hip hip hooray, hip hip hooray, the cheers rang out across the parade ground and then they reverberated back off the HQ building I thought that they must have wakened the angels in heaven up and shook the devil in hell. The Colonel looked on and his eyes glistened and as the last cheer died away he lowered his salute and he and the officers went inside HQ. We were dismissed to go to our duties each quietly thinking about what had just happened because for us who had enlisted that first day at the town hall it was the end of something special.

As we started peeling the spuds again and all talk was about the startling events that had just happened after all like he had said the battalion and Col Jack had been together since the beginning and everyone was thunder struck at what had taken place. Gorge said. "It's a pity about Col Jack I thought he would be with us all the way to the end and this Captain Hook sounds and looks a bit of a handful", he threw a spud into a Dixie of water ready for cutting up. Frank replied. "I think the new Colonel will be alright hook or no hook he seems to know what it's all about and these new Officers and NCOs some have fought in Belgium and that can only be good for our training, they can pass on first hand experience of the German army and how to handle them." He inspected the spud he had just peeled and then threw it in the water before continuing. "As for Col Jack he's off to get the other battalion ready it's a pity like you said but just because you are well liked doesn't mean you are best for the job. You mark my words Col Terry will put us through our paces and you can bet on that." I speared another spud from the huge pile and said. "Come on let's get these spuds done or the cooks will have our guts for garters not to mention the rest of the battalion." Two days later our proper khaki uniforms arrived and at last we were able to get rid of the hated blue ones we had been

wearing for what seemed like ever. With the uniforms came the rest of our kit, webbing and ammunition pouches belts, straps, and back packs, ground sheets, socks, shirts and underwear as well as a thousand other little bits of kit which was all the more to be inspected. We looked at each other in our new uniforms and burst out laughing because we looked exactly like the Territorial's that we had all treated with disdain because their uniforms didn't fit properly. We now knew how it felt as more than one officer on parade despaired at the sight of us stood there for inspection. And more times than I care to remember Sergeants and Corporals had called us 'sacks of shit tied in the middle'. But after a while as the uniforms wore in after they got wet and dried off many times and as they got the usual wear and tear of army training we began to look better and better in them. A few days later the first contingent of rifles arrived and at last we could get rid of the old Lee-Metfords that we had only been able to use for drill purposes. We were called down to the armoury where Lt Cole and the armourer Sgt Williams issued us each with our own rifle. Sat at the armourers table Lt Cole wrote down the serial number of the weapon next to the name of the man it had been issued too and then we had to sign to show that we had received it. After this we spent a long time removing the grease from the rifles this was because they were brand new and the protective grease was still on them the grease prevented rust and protected the barrels whilst they were in storage. We then gave them a dry cleaning and a light oiling and then after we had done all this we had our first rifle inspection.

Up until receiving our weapons we had relied on drawings and one rifle that was used to demonstrate the various points we had to learn about musketry. We attended our next weapons lecture with Cpl Dusty Miller and we did this with an eager will to participate in the training, before we were quieter than a poachers ferret now we were bustling with excitement. Cpl Miller was one of Col Terry's new NCOs and was excellent at musketry and had retired to the reserves a couple of years ago. He stood in front of us as we sat round in a half circle we were doing this part of our training on the football pitch at the bottom of the camp. A GS table had been set up with a blanket on it and on this was a stripped down rifle the Cpl said. "Now watch and take note of what I'm doing you've been through these procedures if only by following the demonstrations but now you will be doing it for real with your own weapon so listen up and learn. He proceeded to put his rifle back together in double quick time saying. "Right now before you start stripping and reassembling your own weapons we are going to go over the rifle again now I know you have had these lectures before but just for the thick and idle ones for the dreamers and the ner do wells we'll do it all again. And he looked at us with a sadistic smile on his face he must have known we were itching to get at our weapons. He continued with the lecture. "On the table in front of you now reassembled is the same rifle you have in your hands." He picked up the rifle and held it out in front of him and began to go on to describe the weapon saying. "This rifle is designated the Rifle No 1 Mk III or the short Lee-Enfield as it is known. The action of the rifles of the turn bolt variety and uses rear locking lugs. The rifle has a detachable box magazine that holds ten rounds of .303 ammunition and is situated in front of the trigger guard." He pointed to it on the rifle he was holding before continuing. "Now the overall length of the weapon is forty four and tree quarter inches and it weighs eight and a half pounds and the muzzle velocity of the rifle is two thousand and eighty feet per second." He turned the rifle butt towards us and pointed out. "The main sight is of the ramp type and it is calibrated to well over a thousand yards but don't you be bothering about that we want you to see the whites of their eyes before you open fire right lets see you spread your groundsheets out and strip down your rifles for inspection now get on with it! This type of weapon training went on for the rest of our time at the camp and we were taught to strip and reassemble our weapons by day and by night. We were taught to load and unload them and also how to clear stoppages in the rifle and a thousand other little tricks of musketry. Then there was bayonet practice learning to fix and unfix bayonets smoothly as a squad and as an individual. How to charge and skewer hanging straw filled kit-bags and pretend they were the enemy with the instructors screaming that the way of the bayonet was the way of the British soldier and that a touch of 'cold steel' could shift any enemy. We were taught to walk in extended line with bayonets fixed and at a steady pace showing total disdain for your enemy this we were told unnerved the enemy's troops and then finally when we got close enough we were released into the

charge. Running as if all the demons in hell were chasing you and yelling and screaming till you thought your lungs would burst and then finally spitting your enemy on twelve inches of cold steel. Loosing all reality and feeling a sense of euphoria never felt before this was the pure gut feeling of bayonet drill.

The best bit of the training for me was when we could go to the ranges, for we had to qualify as best we could but a few like me and Frank's Brother Mickey and Elijah Mack who was one of the toughs who were in our platoon. We were singled out for more practice and to train as marksmen because we had a better ability for shooting than the rest. A rifle range had been constructed about a mile away from the camp out on the moors a banking that had been formed by the moor eroding away was used as a fire wall. This smothered and stopped any bullets from travelling further out down the moor and killing some hapless sheep or shepherd that happened to be out there. Eight targets could be positioned in front of this natural fire wall and this was fine the only thing that was a bit of a problem was that the range was only about five hundred yards long. This was because there was another eroded banking at this end stopping you moving any further back. But as we kept being told distance was not the object but rate of fire was. S/Sgt Cocker who was our musketry instructor told us about our rifles saying. "We fired this type of rifle at Mön's and we fired that fast that Fritz thought that he had come up against whole machine-gun sections laying fire down against him." He smoothed his moustache with his finger. 'But he was mistaken it was disciplined British Army musketry and rate of fire. And God help me if we had the ammunition and enough troops to keep it up then Old Fritz might just have given up and gone home. But as it was we gave him an awful mauling and its one he won't forget in a hurry.

The first time I used the range the feeling of excitement in me was overwhelming it was the feeling I got when we went on a day trip to Blackpool or when I held hands with Helen Shaw. We marched down to the range on a grey overcast morning were there a tall Staff Sergeant with a luxurious black moustache and a face that even a tribe of head-hunters would have taken fright at addressed us saying. "My name to anyone who doesn't know it is Cocker S/Sgt Cocker and I am the range instructor and don't you ever forget it and I'm here to teach you to shoot Gawd help us! So listen up these here rifles you have been issued with are meant for death and destruction that is of the enemy." His gaze took us all in as he continued. "It is not and I repeat not issued for the death of your friends and comrades so watch listen and learn and, any messing around and I will shove that there weapon so far up your ass you will have to swallow your pull through to clean it." He smoothed his moustache with his finger this was a habit of his when he'd made a speech. He stood legs straddled hands on hips and said. "Now listen up Capt Thornley is the range officer, Lt Cole is the safety officer and Sgt Domby is in charge of ammunition. Your own Sergeants and Corporals will also be here to help out with the firing practice." He pointed at us to make his point. "But I am the main Instructor and you will pin your ears back and listen to what I have to say you will follow my instructions to the letter and obey them and woe betide anyone who doesn't. Oh and please no comedians on this range if you don't mind. We shuffled our feet impatiently and I for one just wanted to get on with it. Then the S/Sgt shouted. "Right Platoon Sergeants and Corporals sort out your target and ammunition parties and then march the rest of them back behind the firing line if you please."

When we got behind the firing line we saw that Major Melstone and the rest of the company officers were off to one side watching. I saw that a G.S. table had been set up near them and had been covered with a blanket this was the place where Sgt Domby and his party had set up to issue the ammunition for live firing. The first eight of us went up to collect our ammo as Sgt Domby said. "Ten rounds per man." George asked. "What is that all?" Domby looked at him with a jaundiced eye as he remarked. "You're lucky to get that some battalions are only getting five rounds per man you can thank Colonel Terry for the extra five rounds and the fact that he still has some pull. We collected our rounds and preceded to the firing line each covering off the target we were given. Then we got the order to load which we did. The next order was to lie down flat on the ground facing down to the targets this was known as the 'prone position'. Then the next order came which was

look to your front then came five rounds individual fire at the target to your front that is your target and not any other persons and then 'ire!' The crack of the rifles went off in our ears leaving them with a slight ringing and dullness in our hearing. S/Sgt Cocker walked up and down behind us keeping up a litany of advice saying. "Keep them butts tight in to your shoulder or you'll know what for, keep your sights on the target and squeeze the trigger don't pull it remember squeeze don't jerk." I had never felt a sensation like the one I got from firing my weapon the warmth of the butt as your cheek was cushioned against it. The caressing of the trigger and the holding of the breath when squeezing it, the unmistakable smell of gun-oil and cordite, I felt a security and comfort that I had never felt before. I can only relate it to the comfort and safety you have when a thunder storm crashes outside and you are warm and safely tucked up in bed it was the same kind of warmth. And I could only think with some trepidation that I felt truly at home with this weapon of death.

We had fired our first five rounds checked our targets and Major Melstone had said. "Well done young lamb that's damn good shooting." I replied. "Thank you very much sir." We moved to the back of the group and the next detail moved up to the firing line. George who had been on the next target to me was rubbing his shoulder whilst saying. "Bloody hell my shoulders black and blue it feels like I've been kicked by an angry sodding mule." I said to him. "You've got to keep it tight into the shoulder George otherwise it kicks back and bruises your shoulder which is what happened to you don't forget tight in the shoulder. He looked at me like I was something on the bottom of his boot before he replied. "Listen to bloody Robin Hood here just cause you're the Majors pet and just cause you did all right out there don't think your "cock of the walk" because you're not, bloody hell your only a boy. I was quite angry with George and said. "Alright if that's the way you want it carry on and I hope your shoulder drops off I won't give you any more advice after all I'm only a boy. And just to point out to you Robin Hood used a bow and arrow and not a rifle so there." I sniffed deeply and ignored him I knew he was like this partly because of his shoulder but also because he was just not a very good shot. A point S/Sgt Cocker had not failed to emphasize with his next sarcastic comment which was. "Next time Drew don't bother firing just throw the bloody rifle you'll injure more of the enemy that way I can tell you." As range days progressed we learnt more about the mysteries of, windage and elevation, grouping and sectoring, rapid, section and sustained fire. We learned about judging distance and to recognise what an enemy looked like coming towards you at different distances to tell the times of cavalry, artillery and infantry passing at a distance and a hundred more skills to be learned in the art of musketry. Some like Bert, George and Charlie would never be marksman or even really that good a shot but in section, platoon or even company firing they would hold their own. Others like Mickey Lord, Elijah Mack and Me were encouraged to practice our skills more and so we became the marksmen of the company.

In fact I was sent on a course to Hazelmere in the Lake District for two days to learn about the Vickers machine-gun and all though the course was alright they only had one machine gun to teach us with and much to my disappointment I never got to fire it. But our Instructor did manage to inform us that it was a 'three o three ins. calibre water cooled machine-gun that was fed with a canvas belt of rounds and that it could fire at a rate of four hundred and fifty to five hundred rounds per minute. He also explained that it was prone to jamming quite often, and we were taught different drills to overcome and clear these jams and that in a nutshell was the course but at least it got me out of fatigues and duties for a couple of days. While I was away Frank Lord and Tommy Macey who was Elijah Mack's pal and another bloke who we thought of as the toughs and who had been put into our company went away on a Mills Bomb course and they seemed to have really enjoyed it. At this time there were also promotions from amongst the ranks and Sgt Domby got made up to Staff Sergeant, Corporal Kenny got made up to Sergeant and Frank and George were made up to Lance Corporals or skaters as they were known in the army. I was called into Company-Sergeant-Major Greaves office where he looked at me with his piercing eyes before saying. "Now look here young Lamb I want you to keep your nose clean and get about your business just like you have been doing. Because there's a few people round here have their eye on you my lad make no mistake." My head was spinning and I couldn't think for the life of me anything that I had done wrong, I was just about

to blurt this out when the CSM continued. "Don't fret it's for the right reasons so don't you be worrying your head about it. You're a lad with a bright future in front of him and it's only because of your age that you weren't promoted this time round." He continued to scrutinise me as he said. "Listen it will come but you must have patience and like I said keep your nose clean and get on with your duties and you could go far lad." I replied. "Thank you sir I don't know what to say I never realised." I was in heaven just to think that me Billy Lamb had been noticed and that people really thought I could make something of myself this was one of the best days of my life. The CSM barked. "You don't have to say anything nobodies asking you now away you go and get on with your duties otherwise your future will look bleak and you'll be on jinkers for life." I was floating on air as I left the office and went back down to our hut I didn't hear or speak to anyone on the way back as I was in a world of my own. I pushed the door of the hut opened my bed was just further in on the right and I flopped down on it. My head felt like a sack full of ferrets were fighting inside it and I never noticed the hut was empty until much later when everyone returned. No one said anything to me but I think they must have heard because the smiles on their faces were nearly as big as mine. And as I dropped off to sleep that night I just couldn't believe that I was that well thought of in the battalion it was like a dream come true.

In the few spare hours we got off from fatigues and duties we played cards and crown and anchor or organized football games between the various platoons and sections we griped and gossiped about what was going on in camp and speculated on the rumours that were always doing the rounds. But writing took up a lot of our spare time and we wrote a lot to friends and family and the people we knew back home it kept our spirits up even in the darkest hours. Helen and Rosie had both been writing to me regularly and both seemed to be getting quite ardent about their feelings for me. Now whether this was to do with me personally or was just to do with their patriotism or whether it was about the war I didn't know but Helen would always be the one that I wanted. But I knew that I would have to put Rosie straight when I eventually went on leave and tell her how I felt about Helen always supposing we ever get any leave. Mrs Moffat had written and had sent packages with food, cigarettes, soap and what she called other creature comforts in them. These were always welcome and God bless her showed what a kind and thoughtful woman she was but as she kept telling me in her letters I was like another son to her. And now with winter upon us parcels of knitted scarves, gloves, socks, jumpers and balaclavas were being sent to us. But not just by friends and family it seemed like all the women in Blackthorn were knitting articles and sending them to the battalion. The problem was we were in danger of being buried under tons of woollen clothing but it showed what pride the town had in its battalion. The other thing we did when we were off duty was to walk down to Wetherington village and have a few pints in the two pubs there and this added much to the prosperity of the two landlords and that was probably why they always made us welcome. The village took the battalion to its heart and was as fiercely partisan to it as were the people of Blackthorn, and you would have thought we had been recruited from the village by the way they went on. There were a few minor skirmishes with a few of the village lads about lasses some of our men were courting but it was nothing much. Me and the rest of the lads from our hut spent our time in the Raven Arms playing shove ha penny, skittles, darts and dominoes, and drinking the full bodied ale that was served in there. However unlike Blackthorn were people could afford to buy drinks for the towns thirsty fighting heroes. The agricultural population of the village were a lot poorer and could just about afford to buy a pint for themselves. So more than often we ended up buying drinks for them and very happy they seemed to be with this arrangement. And always when we walked in the question they would ask just like the people at home was. 'When are you leaving to join the fighting then?' It was a question to which we had no answer although we had asked it of ourselves quite often but so far no answer was forthcoming from the powers that be.

Chapter Four

Christmas was almost upon us and leave was being sorted out for the battalion, however this would be of a short duration as we were due to move to a camp in the South of England in January. So with this it was decided to split the battalion into two halves each half to receive a weeks leave. The ones who didn't have the first leave would be busy packing the camp up and getting it ready to hand over to Colonel Jack and our new second battalion then the first leave batch when they came back would take over and carry on. There was a sense of excitement and tension hanging over the camp with everyone waiting for the lists to be put up so they would know which leave batch they would be in. When it came it was a shock to our company which Major Melstone had volunteered to be split in two this would make sure that the battalion would be exactly halved. George Drew, Albert Hall and Frank Lord had all been selected for the first half of the leave batch. Elijah Mack, Jimmy and Mickey Lord and I were all in the second half while Tommy Macey had disappeared on a trench mortar course and would have to catch up on his leave. To say we grumbled about this state of affairs is to put it mildly. George Drew thought he was the cock of the walk crowing. "Never mind lads I'm sure we can leave you a few lasses and maybe a couple of beers for when you get back home." This earned him a volley of thrown boots all of which hit their target I am glad to say which served him right. But this also had the added bonus of making George keep his comments to himself for a while. Frank laughing said. "Don't you worry our leave will be over before you know it and then it will be your turn to laugh at us and I'm quite sure you will soon be laughing at our expense."

Two days later they departed and as they left the square and marched off down to the village train station the band played them off to the tune of "*The British Grenadiers*". We had been drawn up on the square as well and a cheer was called for from us which we gave half hearted. CSM Greaves bawled at us. "You can do better than that for your friends and comrades so let me hear you cheer till your throats hurt or I assure you that everyone will suffer." Not liking the sound of this threat we gave them a rip roaring cheer which echoed off the huts near the square. This was returned by the leave men as they marched past us and on out the camp gates but then again they had something to cheer for. I saw George and Frank the new stripes on their arms standing out and there was Bert grinning and leading up the rear S/Sgt Dobby who was going home as well but only after Major Melstone had ordered him to take his leave. I had gone to see him the night before in the company office where he was sat making lists of the kit to be packed and moved in January. He looked up and said. "Hello young Billy Boy what can I do for you then?" I replied. "Excuse me staff but could you do me a favour and deliver these letters to Helen and Rosie and there's one for Mrs Moffat there as well." He held out his hand and I gave him the letters before continuing. "I was going to ask George Drew but him and Bert are too busy talking about all the lasses their going to charm in their uniforms when there at home to bother about ought else." He smiled at me and said. "Don't you worry about that pair and their talk of lasses its all hot air and the rest is all up here" and he tapped the side of his head." He laughed at this and I and I laughed with him then he lit his pipe saying. "Is there anything else I can do for you but don't forget you won't be that far behind us with your leave only a week so think on its not going to be years?" He sat back in his chair. So I said. "I was just wondering do you think this move down south is just a stop off on the way to France." He stroked his chin and sighed puffing on his old pipe before saying. "It could well be Billy Boy it wouldn't surprise me at all and I know you young lads are eager to get there but don't forget what I told you about wishing." He pointed at me with his pipe stem and said. "Right then I've got to get on with these lists they wont do themselves and they have to be ready before I go on leave tomorrow so go and get on with whatever you have to do." I smiled at him apologising. "Sorry to keep you staff and thanks for the letters I hope you have a good leave and I will see you when you get back." He was back looking through his lists and merely waved a hand in my direction. I turned and walked out the door I went back to the hut but the ones going on leave were still planning on what they were going to do I couldn't be listening to this so I went quietly to bed to get away from them. After they had left the week went by at a snails pace even though there were a lot more fatigues and duties shared among us that were left behind and even more so with preparing for the move but on the bright side though the ablution and cook-house were less crowded. However the war news was not so good nor had it been for a while what with Møn's, and La Cateau in August and Ypres in

November. The expectation that people had in the beginning that the war would be over by Christmas was now long gone and we new now we were in it for the long run. Also the casualties had been more than anybody would have believed possible. The regulars that had gone over there at first to sort the Huns out had ceased to exist and once proud and famous regiments had been decimated and the old army now ceased to exist almost. The casualties among the rank and file were harsh but among the officers it was appalling. And a lot of aristocratic and old families had lost their sons and heirs and more than a few had lost all their sons and there was now nobody left to pass their lands and titles on to. New regiments and divisions were being sent to the fighting as fast as they could be made ready. And we were surely going to be sent off any day now and that is probably why we were moving down south so the packing and fatigues did not bother us as much as they might have done.

The first half of the battalion returned from leave and we told them horrendous tales about the amount of fatigues and duties they would have to do whilst we went on leave. But most of them seemed down in the mouth which I put down to them having just come back off leave although it seemed to be more than just that. Frank Lord was talking to his brothers Jimmy and Mickey and they were sat on his bed and all three had their heads together. I spotted George who had just come in and was by his bed so I shouted. "Hey up George did you and Bert show off your uniforms to all the lasses or what?" He seemed to look right through me as though I wasn't there and I was beginning to get an uneasy feeling as I looked round. I asked. "Where's Bert as he gone the toilet or what?" George sat down on his bed and said. "Listen to me Billy Boy the day before we were due back Bert's mother died she hadn't been well for a while but it was still a big shock for him. He came round to General Gordon Street and old Dombey got on to the battalion and fixed up for him to get some compassionate leave so he can sort things out at home." I just looked down staring at the top of his head for a few minutes until finally I replied. "I'm really sorry to hear that poor Bert of course I will call round on leave to see how he's getting on." George stood up and lit a cigarette he then passed it to me and went on to light one for himself. So I asked him how his leave had been. He looked at me and said. "To tell you the truth Billy Boy nothing special I thought that Mabel and I might get together but she didn't seem really interested." He sighed and then continued saying. "Anyway I though that's alright I will pick up with Sally Pearson because she was at home and I quite fancied a bit of spooning with her but all I got was the cold shoulder even though I was in uniform." I never thought that I would feel sorry for George but looking at this sad figure in front of me I did. He lit another cigarette as he continued. "I will tell you something Billy Boy this war has spoiled everything things have changed and they won't ever go back to what they were. Bloody hell if you told me that I wouldn't even be able to spoon with a girl whilst on leave I would have said you needed sending to the asylum but that's what happened what a leave." I commiserated with him and I did genuinely feel sorry for him but what could I do. Then he said. "Anyway go and pack and get ready for tomorrow and listen Billy boy I wish you a better leave than I had." I moved over to my bed and on the way Frank waved at me he asked How's it going then Billy Boy just remember that tomorrow we will be on our way home for Christmas so perk up not long to go", and he smiled at me reassuringly. I went over to my bunk and started to pack my kit for my leave but to be honest Gorge had put a damper on things with his gloomy talk and I just hoped that Helen would welcome me more warmly than he seemed to have been greeted by the women he liked.

The next morning we paraded on the square there was a bitterly cold northern wind blowing and the sky was steel grey and promised snow before long in fact sleet was already falling and I was glad we were wearing our greatcoats. We marched off as the other half of the battalion had done before us and the band played "Lassie from Lancashire" as we left the square. The other half of the battalion had been paraded and they gave us a rousing cheer which we returned as we passed them. Out of the camp gates we swung and on to the road that ran down to the village our boots crunching on the surface as we marched along. Then somebody knocked out a mouth organ and we started to sing as we went all the rank and file and the officers as well favourites like 'Tipperary' and 'Dolly Grey' and a great many more were sung at the top of our voices as we marched along. We reached

the village and were paraded outside the railway station as the trains arrived we were told to enter the station and board them by platoons. We were at the end of the formation and had to wait for the last train before we could board but we had been fallen out to wait for the transport so it wasn't so bad as we could smoke talk or read while we waited. We had already cheered and said good-bye to the other platoons of the battalion and now it was our turn to enter the station and board the train that was pulled up there. We found ourselves a carriage me Jimmy and Mickey Lord Charlie Slater and Elijah Mack. The train pulled out of the station and we were on our way the journey however seemed to take for ever and we seemed to be shunted into one siding or another every few minutes to allow ammunition trains and troop trains to pass. Eventually though we arrived at Blackthorn railway station as we were pulling in we could see the permanent black cloud that seemed to hang over the town. This was caused by the foundry and mill chimneys belching out there smoke and covering everything in a dirty gritty mess which looked even worse in winter. Then there was the acrid smell of the smoke a mixture of burning coal and sulphur that got up your nose and left a taste in your mouth like a brass bucket. And on top of this was the smell of hops as Melstone's brewery made another batch of beer like we always said you couldn't mistake the smell of Blackthorn.

We said our good-byes outside the station as me and Charlie were going to get the tram home while Jimmy and Mickey were going to try to catch their mother as she finished work. Meanwhile Elijah Mack was going to buy presents for his wife and nippers. Up until a few weeks back we had been wary of Elijah and Tommy Macy who we knew were toughs who came from the Higherscrop district. But as we got to know them we realised that they were two of the best blokes in the company and we became firm friends with them. They always got on with their work and never threatened anybody and like the rest of us they had both volunteered. I once asked Elijah why he had joined the battalion. He told me we liked a bit of a fight me and the lads, out our way it can be a bit rough now and then. But we never harmed any who didn't harm us and that's a fact we might be a bit rough in our ways and our actions but we aren't bullies. And we are loyal to our town in our own way besides we can't have a lot of Huns pushing us about and shouting the odds. He said this with such dignity that you couldn't help but like him for it. We also found out that he and Tommy were both married they were both twenty two and had been married since they were seventeen. They had both worked at the Lucas Foundry since they left school at fourteen so they had both worked all there lives so far and were not work shy. He showed me a picture of his wife who was a nice looking lass who worked at Courts weaving mill then he showed me one of his two boys, and you could tell by the pride in his voice that he thought the world of them. It's funny because I would never have taken Elijah for a sentimental type so it just goes to show that you never know with people. He turned to us saying. "Well lads I will be seeing you and tell Bert I'm sorry about his mother and if any of you get out Higherscrop way look me up you can nearly always find me in Flynn's tavern and if not you've got my address baring that Ill see you here next week." We shook hands with Elijah and off he went into the town to find his presents for the family he adored. Next Jimmy and Mickey shook hands with us and said good-bye and off they went to surprise their mother as she left work. Charlie said. "Just me and you now Billy Boy come on lets get the tram home I'm looking forward to a home cooked meal and a bit of pampering off me mum." However I had no such thing to look forward to at General Gordon Street although it would be good to see Ma Moffat who had been so kind to me and also to see Rosie again but most of all I was looking forward to seeing Helen.

I got off the tram with Charlie on Coniston Road were we shook hands and he said. "I will come round tomorrow and pay my respects to Mrs Moffat if that's alright. I replied. "Yes, and then we had better go and see Bert and give him our sympathy and find out how he's going on so I will see you tomorrow then Charlie." We set off on our separate ways him to Nelson Street and me round the corner to General Gordon Street as I walked along the streets seemed strangely deserted and quite it might have been me but there seemed to be a damper on the whole atmosphere of the day. And then I was turning the corner into General Gordon Street walking along it and then up the path to the door of one hundred and twenty three where I rang the bell. I stood there feeling quite apprehensive when suddenly the door opened and there stood Rosie her face looked worn and drained. Bits of her

blonde hair had escaped from the clips that were holding it in place and one large piece hung down the side of her cheek she was pushing it out of the way with her hand but this froze in place when she noticed me. Her mouth opened and closed a few times before she finally said. "Oh Billy Boy it's so good to see you", and tears began to run down her cheeks and her lower lip trembled and finally her face crumpled like a piece of old newspaper. I stepped forward put my arms round her and hugged her to me she buried her face in the shoulder of my greatcoat and the sobs shook her body. Eventually she stood back and we held hands at arm's length she studied me and then gave my hands a squeeze before releasing them. I looked more closely at her and the tear tracks looked like melted ice had run down her cheeks she sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. I gave her my hanky and she blew her nose which sounded like a River Clyde steam ship coming in to dock. She raised her hand to the unruly lock of hair again and managed to secure it back into position. I asked. "How's Ma Moffat?" She stood to one side and said. "What am I thinking about leaving you stood on the door step in the cold Ma will have me guts for garters if she found out." I hadn't noticed that since Id arrived and we had been talking that we hadn't moved on into the hallway I walked on through and into the front parlour where I dropped my kit. Rosie followed me in and I removed my cap and greatcoat she took these from me and went out to hang them on the stand in the hall. She returned just as I was lighting a cigarette and said "Can I have one of those please if you don't mind?" She held out her hand and I looked at her amazed I was trying to work out if she was joking or not for as far as I knew she had never smoked since I had known her. She gave me a pitying look before saying. "Lot's of things have changed round here and not just in this house things have changed all over the country. So you needn't look like a fisherman that's been slapped with a wet cod like I said things are changing and people better get used to it." She pulled her hand back as she said. "Look lots of women are smoking nowadays it is just the way things are." I replied. "It's not that Rosie I don't mind you smoking it just knocked me back a little and I didn't even know that you'd started." As I said this to her I unbuttoned my tunic and sat down in my favourite armchair by the fire getting myself comfortable. It was now that she retorted in a shrill voice. "You don't mind well pardon me for breathing but who the hell are you not to mind what I do." I was startled by this outburst but she hadn't quite finished with her tirade. "Oh forgive me I'm so sorry Mr high and mighty Lamb but I didn't realise you were my father laying down the rules." The look she gave me was one of the utmost anger and outright contempt as she said. "You can keep your bloody cigarettes and shove them as far up your arse as they will fit and then you won't need to give anybody one. It was with this as a parting shot and a flick of her head that she span round and flounced out of the parlour.

I sat there in the chair with my mouth opened like the Bishops flies when he had met the actress I was stunned at the degree and ferocity of Rosie's anger. Surely this was not all about a cigarette for I would have gladly given her the packet and it wouldn't have bothered me a bit. It was just that she had taken me aback with her request for one and I thought it would be wise to tread carefully round here while I was on leave. I sat smoking and staring into the fire while I pondered what was happening here, and I was concentrating hard on Rosie's tirade trying to get an insight into it when I sensed something. I broke out of my reverie and looked up to see that Rosie had re-entered the room quietly she was staring at me but how long she had been there I don't know. She smiled at me and said. "I'm sorry Billy Boy for flying off the handle like that, but things have been really hard round here for a while." I offered her a cigarette which she accepted with a wan smile just to show there were no hard feelings. I lit my own cigarette before saying. "Sit down Rosie and tell me what's happened and I guarantee you'll feel better for it and you never know maybe I can help." She studied me and then replied. "Yes I think you may be right about that it's been hard having nobody to talk to you know. I couldn't talk to Ma about things because now she's in a world of her own." She let out a sigh that just about broke my heart to hear before she said. "Beth's just the same but you wouldn't know about Beth being sweet on Jack or him on her as it turned out. They kept it quite about them walking out together but he used to write to her regular from India and they were going to get betrothed only the war came along." I was my turn to look startled now but I didn't interrupt her I just let her carry on at her own pace. "He was still writing from Belgium to her and said he was

going to tell Ma about it on his next leave and he had Charlie picked out as his best man and he told her Ma would be all for it as she loved her like a daughter.” The tears coursed down her cheeks now as she went on to say. “But now she has nothing and Jack's death has hit her really hard and she walks round here like a ghost haunting the place so I couldn't even talk to her either.” There was no way that I could begin to understand what she had been through shouldering a burden like this on her young shoulders. In fact there was no way I could comprehend what any of them had been through and I thought there were houses like ours up and down the land and a shiver ran down my spine at the thought. Poor Rosie I said. “Tell me all about what happened you know you can always talk to me and how much I love you. So she sat down opposite me and began to tell me what had been happening at General Gordon Street. “You can't begin to believe the shock and horror when that bloody telegram arrived on the front door step and I never stop cursing the day that I took it in my hand.” She paused and licked her lips saying. “It was just like any normal day me and Beth were cleaning and dusting and Ma was in the kitchen baking and the smell of polish and bread baking was wonderful.” The breath caught in her throat as she continued. “We could hear Ma singing and Beth and I had been talking about going to the church dance on Friday night anyway a few days before Beth had received a letter from Jack telling her how much he loved her and that he could not wait for his leave to get betrothed to her. He also mentioned a bit about were they were but this had been crossed out by the censors, and all in all things seemed to be going fairly well apart from a hold up with the mail.” Rosie shook her head as though clearing it then went on to say. “Jack had also informed Ma about him and Beth and also about their forthcoming betrothal and just like he told Beth Ma was over the moon about it. Rosie smiled at me as she told me. “On the Monday she received the news of the engagement in a letter from Jack and she came down and hugged and kissed Beth and told her she was now part of the family and how glad she was for the two of them” I could see the memory flooding back into Rosie's face and she carried on saying. “That night we had a celebratory supper just the three of us and we opened a couple of bottles of stout to toast the happy couple and Ma got quite tipsy.” She smiled at the memory of it and I couldn't help but smile back at her for I had never seen Ma tipsy or even have a drink.

She smoothed down her skirt and then took the tale up once more. It was like I had been saying we had all been in a happy mood for quite some time. Beth had asked me to be her bridesmaid and I had said of course I'd love to be and she had gone on to say I was the closest thing she had to a sister.” She smiled at the memory before saying. “Well of course we both ended up having a good cry and Ma came out to see what was going on and ended up crying with us. Anyway I was just flicking the duster over the hall stand when the door bell rang anyway I walked up the passage and opened the door and stood there was a young boy in the blue uniform of the Post Office Telegram Service. She paused and a blank look came over her face for a moment and then she continued. “Anyway he said telegram for Mrs Moffat and held it out in his hand I took it off him and signed for it then he went back down the path mounted his red bike and pedalled off. I looked at the telegram and saw it was from the War Office and looked official so I closed the door and walked back down the hall way shouting for Ma.” Rosie looked up at me and then back down at the hanky she was twisting in her lap before saying. “By this time Ma had shouted back asking me what I wanted making such a row so I told her I had a telegram for her. She came out into the hall and asked what a telegram for me? Then she pondered who'd be sending me a telegram? I looked at it again and said it's from the War Office Ma.” I could see the tears forming in Rosie's eyes and I offered her another cigarette just to calm her nerves she took one and then cupped my hand in hers as I lit it for her. Her touch was warm but there was a trembling in it and my heart went out to her with a tenderness I hoped she could feel. She took up her narrative once again saying. “I held out the telegram to Ma and she took it saying to me it's probably from Jack and Charlie to say they have leave. They once did this before when they got leave on short notice and she proceeded to tear open the envelope the telegram was in.” Tears began to roll down Rosie's cheeks and she was now visibly shaking. “Anyway Ma read what was in the telegram and then everything seemed to happen at once her mouth opened and closed a few times and then an unholy sound came out of it. The noise was

like a banshees wail and Ma's face was as white as a sheet, and the sound rose and fell and rose and fell and I thought it was going to carry on whilst judgement day.

Rosie dabbed at her eyes with her hanky and then snuffled back the tears. She said. "I never want to hear a sound like that again as long as I live. Both Beth and I moved towards her to find out what was wrong and to support Ma but before we got to her the wailing cut off dead and the telegram slipped out of her fingers. Her eyes rolled up into the back of her head, and she dropped to the floor like a sack of coal and lay there in a dead faint." My head was spinning and the compassion I felt for the three women was overwhelming she looked at me and saw I think what I was feeling. Rosie continued. "We managed to get Ma onto the couch in the back parlour and we were pretty scared because she was not moving at all. I told Beth to go and get Dr Durkin while I made Ma comfortable Beth was now as white in the face as Ma was and I think it crossed her mind to argue with me." She stopped for a moment to catch her breath and then said. "I think like me Beth knew there was something terribly wrong and I think she had guessed at the truth but I didn't give her chance for it to sink in. I shouted at her that Ma was very ill and that she should waste no more time in getting the doctor and this seemed to get through to her and she went off like a bat out of hell." It was beginning to get dark so I stood up and lit the wall lamps they flared to life and cast a bright light on the room. I turned the gas down so that the light in the room was more subdued although I didn't think that Rosie had noticed. Sighing she took up the tale once more. "When Beth had gone to fetch the doctor I went back into the hall and picked up the telegram from where it had dropped on the floor. That's when I first saw the news about Jack and Charlie that had so upset Ma I placed the telegram on the table and went across to keep an eye on her." Tears clouded Rosie's eyes as she went on saying. "She seemed in a bad way her face was as white as chalk and her breathing was coming in short shallow breaths there were beads of sweat on her brow and her eyes were still rolled back." Rosie got up and left the room and I thought the retelling of the tale must have been too much for her and who was I to argue with that. However a few moments later she returned with a bottle of beer and two glasses she poured some beer out for the two of us and we both took a quick drink then she sat back down and perched on the edge of the chair. She resumed where she had left off. "Beth came back with Dr Durkin who came bustling into the room and began to minister to Ma and all the time he was asking us questions." She stopped again and took another small sip of beer before continuing. "Whilst this was going on Beth had picked up and read the telegram and this must only have confirmed what she had already guessed at without a word she just wandered out of the room in a trance I was busy with the doctor so I could not go and comfort her straight away." She paused and looked at me with such trusting eyes saying. "Dr Durkin said we must get Ma up to bed and that she was in a state of profound shock and must be nursed day and night. We got her to bed and she just lay there as the doctor left a prescription to be filled he said that he would be back in the morning and asked me if I was alright to which I replied I was and then he left." Rosie screwed the handkerchief up in her palm and then said. "I could not find Beth and I needed to get the prescription the doctor had left for Ma so thank god for Sally Pearson who offered to sit with Ma and help in anyway she could. So off I went and got the medicine and returned and gave it to Ma but there was no change in her nor has there been from the time she received the telegram." I replied saying. "This must have been really hard for you Rosie I am so sorry." She laughed saying. "You don't know the half of it after I had seen to Ma and Sally had said she would sit with her whilst I got some rest and something to eat. I had to go and find Beth she was in her room sat on the bed staring into space she didn't move when I entered or even acknowledge me. I tried talking to her but it was no good she would not reply to anything that I said." Tears coursed down her face as she remembered this still she went on. "She's a bit better now but she still hardly talks and you wouldn't recognise her as the old chattering Beth and like I say she glides through the house like a ghost haunting everyone she passes." Rosie grabbed the poker and stuck it in the fire and started giving the coals in the grate a good poking until the flames were roaring up the chimney then she put the poker back on its stand.

She said to me. "To tell you the truth with Beth the way she is I don't know what I would have done at first if it hadn't been for Helen Shaw she's been a diamond and no mistake. Nothing

was too much trouble for her and for that first week I really needed someone to give me a hand there was also Sally pitching in and doing her bit.” I thought about Helen I knew that she was kind but this was something else and Sally Pearson the one that George was always trying to get in the back parlour for a spoon and who I had thought was just plain silly. Well now I knew differently and I would have to thank Helen and her for what they had done for Ma Moffat. Rosie looked at me saying. “Anyway now we have got a nurse in for Ma Dr Durkin recommended one and she seems quite good at her job. The doctor told us we would be better off making these arrangements as there was no sign of Ma getting better any time soon and he was certainly right about that.” She wiped her nose on a hanky before continuing. “Although she is a little better she is still bed bound and never utters a word and we will all be glad when Charlie’s better and can come and see her then maybe that will jolt her out of the malaise she’s in.” I lit another cigarette and offered one to Rosie which she refused as she said. “So you can see that things are non to clever around here at the moment also we’ve lost a lot of the lodgers some have moved away to do war work, and some have moved out because it’s not the same here anymore. In some ways I can’t blame them like I said everything’s changed with the war and it will never be the same again.” She dabbed at her eyes with the hanky saying. “Well that’s about it and I expect your hungry so I will go and make you some supper”, she stood up and left the room before I could say anything. I sat there trying to take in everything that Rosie had said and feeling just so sad for all of them for I knew what grief felt like from loosing my parents. In a way I was glad I was home to give some support to Ma Rosie and Beth but tomorrow we would have to go and see Bert about the loss of his mother. Because this was just another of the tragedies that had happened and that seemed to be weighing down on me. I was feeling more than a little sorry for myself and there were times when I wished I was back at camp for I could see Christmas being a trial in itself. But I knew that it would be something we would all have to get through together and if Christmas was a quite one then so be it. Rosie came in and told me my supper was ready I went in to eat it and tried my best but I wasn’t really hungry so I left most of it. I kissed Rosie goodnight and told her I would just put my head round the door to see how Ma was and I would also introduce myself to Mrs Pritchard the nurse.

I walked slowly up the stairs after everything that had happened today, I was feeling a little tired and I would be glad to get my head down and get some sleep. I reached the first landing and continued down the hall until I came to Ma’s room I knocked and then opened the door and stuck my head round it. The room was dark with just a low light coming from a lamp on the bedside table I could just make out Ma’s shape under the covers on the bed. Next to the bed was a chair and sat on it was the shape of a large woman the shape stood up and moved towards me I backed out into the hallway and the shape followed me in the hallway under better lighting I could see that this must be the nurse. She was a big boned woman with greying hair and a big bosom her starched white apron stood out against the blue of the dress underneath. She looked able and confident and she held out her hand to me she said. “I’m Mrs Pritchard and I’ve been retained as Mrs Moffat’s nurse, I took her hand and shook it. She continued saying. “You’ll be William Lamb no doubt I have heard a lot about you”, and she looked me up and down. I replied “Yes I am but how did you know?” She looked at me and released my hand. “Mr Dombey told me when he was on leave also the girls Rosie and Helen Shaw informed me that you would be home soon along with a description of you.” I felt quite guilty when I heard Helens name mentioned because I had not even thought to have asked Rosie if Helen had been around but no doubt she would be around tomorrow or I would go round and see her. I snapped out of my reverie as Mrs Pritchard was speaking again saying. “I’d rather you did not come in and disturb Mrs Moffat at this time of night she is sleeping soundly and that is the best medicine for her at the moment. She looked at the watch she had fastened to her apron before continuing. “If you come back in the morning that should be fine however she is still far from well so I would not stay to long with her. Please refrain from mentioning either of her sons as we do not know how much she can understand about what’s going on but wed rather not take any chances.” I felt like I used to at school when Id been told off, Mrs Pritchard was a very stern woman and I wouldn’t like to get on her wrong side so I said. “Certainly I will be off to bed now and I will come in tomorrow morning and check hoe she is.” She looked at me as though I was of little worth now and said. “Well then

goodnight Mr Lamb until tomorrow.” I replied. “Yes goodnight Mrs Pritchard” and I took myself off to bed. In the morning after a good breakfast I had a smoke, and then made my way up to Ma's room again Mrs Pritchard had gone for the day and to my surprise Sally Pearson was sat next to the bed. So I said. “Hello Sally, how the devil are you?” She gave me a small tired smile as I continued. “I'd just like to thank you for giving Rosie a hand with Ma it's been very good of you.” She looked up at me saying. “There's no need of thanks Billy Boy you know how much I think of Mrs Moffat and I am only too pleased to help out. But Rosie has done a lot and Helen Shaw has been an angel rushing here after work to see to Mrs Moffat before the nurse turns up and spending weekends sat here reading to her.” I looked over at the mound on the bed there was no movement in fact Ma had not moved or spoke since I had come into her room. I asked. “Has she been like this since the news was broke to her?” Sally said. “Yes there's been no change the doctor says she may snap out of it tomorrow or she may be like this forever he says there's no way of telling. The vicar Rev Loveday and the congregation of the church are praying for her, and he says we must all do the same. But to be honest I am not right sure whether that will work but I suppose it cant do any harm so I pray for her every night.” I moved closer to the bed I could see Ma more clearly now her cheeks were all shrunken in and white, her eyes were wide open and staring straight ahead her grey hair was loose and spread out on the pillow. There was a smell that I could not place at first till I realised it was the smell of illness and it made me feel ill myself. I said. “Hello Ma its Billy Boy I am home on leave and I have come to see how you are?” There was no indication from the shape in the bed that I was in the room let alone that I had just spoken to her. Ma just led there her eyes open staring up at the ceiling a thin string of drool had escaped her lips and was dangling down on to the pillow. I took out my hanky and gently wiped it away still there was no sign that Ma knew or felt what I had just done and I must admit that I was really frightened for her.

Sally said. “This is what she's like all the time you can change her give her medicine to take read to her, and talk to her, and she never makes a murmur its like she's gone to another place you know like she's not here anymore.” I stepped back from the bed, and looked at Sally then I replied. “Yes I see what you mean anyway I have got to go out in a moment when Charlie Slater comes round. We are going round to Bert Halls to give him our condolences on the death of his mother.” Sally looked at me and said. “I heard about his mother will you give him my best wishes at this time.” I nodded my head and said. “I certainly will and thank you Sally not only for your thoughts for Albert but as I have told you before for looking after Ma as well promising to come back later I turned and left the room. I walked back to mine and George's old room and got dressed in my uniform I went down stairs and had just lit a cigarette in the front parlour when the doorbell rang. Rosie shouted through. “Charlie Slater's here for you Billy Boy”. Then I heard her say. “Go on through he's in the front parlour Charlie.” I heard him reply and say to her. “Can I say how sorry I am to hear about Mrs Moffat and may I ask how she is? I hope that she feels better I know it must have been a terrible shock to her about her sons.” Rosie replied. “Thank you Charlie but there's been no change but we hope and pray that there will be anyway show yourself through you will have to pardon me as there is a lot of work to do around here now.” I heard her footsteps retreating down the hallway and the next second Charlie walked in to the parlour his face looked glum as he sat down in the opposite chair to me saying. “No need to ask how you are Billy Boy I can see it in your face.” He pulled out his cigarette packet and proceeded to light one up he put the packet and his Lucifer's back in his pocket then he said. “Tell me about what's been going on”, so I did. When I had finished the tale I lent my head back on the chairs back and blew smoke up at the ceiling and I could not tell if it was in frustration or relief. He said to me. “Blimey you've had a rough time and no mistake Billy Boy”, I could see the sadness on Charlie's face as he said this. I replied. “It's not half as hard a time as Ma and the girls have had I don't even want to think about what they have been through over these last few weeks.” Charlie said. “I was thinking about nipping up and paying my respects to Mrs Moffat but if she's as bad as you say then perhaps I had better leave it until she's feeling a bit better.” I replied by saying. “Yes that would be for the best Charlie as I've said she has no recognition of her surroundings or of anyone in the surroundings she's in a world of her own, and I just hope its a peaceful one and not one of nightmares about Jack.” All this talk had made me quite glum but I said.

“Anyway we had better get round to Albert’s and offer him and Mr Hall our condolences, and our support. I keep thinking of what George said when he came back off leave, and I can’t help but agree with him, it’s going to be a very quite Christmas”.

We left the house and went to catch a tram down to Bert’s house, it was snowing again and very cold and me and Charlie were glad we had our greatcoats on we got off at the stop on Commercial Road. Then we walked down to 72 Cromwell Street which was a nice little terraced house set among a lot of other nice little terraced houses all with different coloured curtains in the front windows trying there hardest to convey a bit of life and colour into the grey uniform landscape on this grey December day. I knocked on the door and it was opened by Mr Hall he was a tall thin man and I could see that his hair was now shot through with grey. He stood there and there was a stoop at his shoulders as though the weight of the world was on them and we could see the weariness in the lines that were drawn on his face which was of a pasty white shade. However on seeing us he tried to put a face on it a small smile came to his lips and he said. “Well lads its right glad to see you I am and I know our Albert will feel the same his mother dying has hit him hard, and you coming round will be a right tonic for him. Come you in and go through to the back room that's were he is and I'll join you myself in a moment.” He stood back and allowed me and Charlie to enter we walked down the hallway and entered the back room. This was the room that all the families used to live in as opposed to the front parlour which was only used on Sundays or on special occasions. As we came in Bert rose out of the chair he had been sitting on by the fire and faced us. He greeted us. “Billy Boy Charlie its really good to see you, come on right in and get a seat in front of the fire you must be freezing?” And saying this he poked the fire until the flames leapt up the chimney then he threw another log onto it. We took our greatcoats off and Bert took them into the hall to hang them up while he was doing this I looked round the room you could see the influence of the deceased Mrs Hall in the little touches here and there. I noticed cushions with crochet covers on them china ornaments on the mantel and on the sideboard along with framed photographs of the Hall family. There was a clothes rack suspended up to the ceiling above the fire the clothes hung on it looked stiff as though they had been left outside in the frost and snow. A battle worn ginger Tom cat sat on the window sill washing its paws and licking its fur. I looked at it more carefully it really was a veteran of many a skirmish as it had one ear missing and also one eye and where the eye had been there was a black scar running down. It stopped grooming itself and looked up at me with its one good eye which was bright and full of life. The gaze from this one eye held me transfixed and I could see in it the age old contempt of cats for the human race. The look that says that cats will tolerate us because we are quite inferior to them and that apart from giving them food and warmth we are not worth bothering about and they can get on far better without us. The Tom gave me one last look of disdain probably thinking I was one of the worst specimens of humans and leapt off the window-sill and ran off towards the front of the house probably to be let out.

Bert came back into the room and sat down again, he offered his cigarettes around and we all lit up. I said. “We were all sorry to hear about your mum Bert it must have come as a complete shock to you and your dad.” He replied. “Yes mum had complained about a bit of stomach trouble for a while but it was on and off and the doctor had been treating her and we thought that she was on the mend. We had just had a bit of a do with family and friends to celebrate an early Christmas before I set off back to camp. It was at this gathering that mum became ill, anyway she was put to bed and my father was going to send for the doctor but mum said not to bother him and she would be all right in the morning so we abided by her wishes. I know dad wasn't happy with the situation but mum was adamant and said if she was still the same in the morning then the doctor could be called. Unfortunately she didn't last that long about one’ clock in the morning the pain was unbearable for her and my dad told me to run and get Doctor Bains. He came straight away and examined mum, he told us it was very serious' an ambulance was sent for and mum was taken to the Infirmary.” I had been watching Bert and I could see in his face how much this was hurting him to relive the sense of loss to him was a living thing but I knew as friends he had to tell us what had happened and let us share his grief. He continued with the story. “We got to the infirmary and there were a lot of people

rushing about and then Doctor Bains told us that mums appendix had burst and that they would have to operate immediately on her. He told us however that it was looking very black and to prepare our self's for the worst." I caught a movement out the corner of my eye and my head snapped round. Bert said. "Don't worry it's only the cat", and I saw the ginger Tom as he came striding back into the room. It leapt back up to what must have been its favourite spot on the window-sill curled its tail under it and gazed over the room. Bert smiled a bit saying. "Mum loved that cat and she was the only one who it would have anything to do with", he turned his eyes away from the cat and I could see tears glistening in them. But he pressed relentlessly on. "Anyway to get back to what I was saying they operated on her, and dad and I both prayed like mad but it didn't make any difference. The doctor came to see us and said unfortunately it had been too late the appendix had ruptured and peritonitis had set in. Dad asked if it would have made any difference if we had got here a couple of hours sooner, and the doctor said not much but dad still blamed himself for not insisting that the doctor be called sooner, and he is still putting himself through hell about it now."

Me and Charlie did not know what to say properly to this and we mumbled some limp kind of response however we were saved further embarrassment by Mr Hall coming into the room, and asking us if wed like a cup of tea. We accepted his offer and he went into the kitchen to make it. All three of us looked at each other wondering what to say next and it was Bert who finally said. "I hope you can make it to the funeral its tomorrow afternoon. The service will be held at St Saviours, but if you don't mind Id like you to join me and my dad and the rest of the family here first." He looked us both in the eye and I could hear the frailness in his voice after all he was not that much older than me and the death of his mother had hit him hard. Both Charlie and I replied that we would both be glad to come round to the house and offer any support we could and that Bert was a good friend and also a comrade and that we were pleased to have been asked. Bert said in a relieved voice. "I didn't know whether you had anything else on or not what with just starting your leave I can't tell you how grateful I am that you've agreed to come and I know dad will feel the same." I suddenly thought I had arranged to meet Helen tomorrow so I said to him. "Listen Bert I have arranged to meet Helen Shaw tomorrow and she was asking when the funeral was." He interrupted me saying. "Bring her here with you Billy Boy that will be all right." I replied. Thanks mate I didn't know whether to ask or not as it may have seemed a bit cheeky." Bert looked at me and said. "Nonsense why Helen has been kindness itself she was one of the first to come round and offer her sympathy and I know how keen you are on her so by all means she must come along with you." Well that took a weight off my mind I can tell you and I would get a message to her that we would be meeting here tomorrow. Mr hall came in carrying four mugs of steaming tea on a tray and handed them out to us. I took my first drink and it was heaven just how I liked it strong enough to fell a drayman's horse. We were all savouring our tea and having a smoke when Mr hall came round again with a bottle of whiskey saying. "Here try a drop of this in it to keep out the cold", and he poured whiskey in Bert and Charlie's mugs. He looked at me holding the bottle towards me and said. "I know your only young Billy Boy but hold your mug out if you're old enough to fight for King and Country then you're old enough to have a drink with us." And with these words he poured a generous helping in to my tea. I could see Bert and Charlie watching me grinning and waiting for my reaction of course I had drunk ale before but never whiskey. I took a drink and at first I could not stand the taste and it must have shown on my face as I spluttered and coughed for those two were having a right laugh at my expense. Even Mr Hall was smiling and he said. "It gets better once you get used to the taste believe me." And he was right by the third sup I was getting to quite like the taste of it. We left Bert's saying goodbye to him and his dad and telling them we would be round tomorrow for the funeral. We caught the tram on Commercial Road back up to Coniston Road. As the tram clanked and rattled along both me and Charlie were lost in our own thoughts. I could not help thinking about all that had happened in our lives in the short time the war had been raging. What with Bert's mother Ma Moffat and her Frank and Charlie it seemed like a dark patch had fallen on our little group of friends lives. And could these events have come at a worst time than Christmas when we should have been celebrating the birth of our saviour.

I pulled out of my reverie as we reached our stop we alighted and bumped into Bob Reeves who was one of the junior office boys at Dombys. He was a squat lad with fair hair and blue eyes and his cheeks were dusted with freckles which the young girls loved. Usually he was a happy go lucky outgoing lad and I knew him quite well as we were much of the same age. However the look on his face at this moment was far from happy it was a look of profound sadness. Charlie asked. "Hey up Bob what's up with your face then?" We walked up to him as Charlie continued saying. "You've a face longer than an undertaker's horse." We all shook hands and I looked at him what Charlie had said was true he looked like he'd the weight of the world on his shoulders. He said. "I will tell you what's happened lads and let's see if you'd be laughing if the same thing happened to you." Charlie passed round his cigarettes and we all lit up and then Bob told us his woes. "I was walking from Dombys to Martins Bank in the High Street this morning to deliver some documents. Coming towards me on the same side were two young ladies they were well dressed and quite nice looking. So I was keeping a watchful eye on them and just daydreaming a little. He coughed and blushed when he said this and both me and Charlie smiled at him thinking he had been caught out by these two young ladies in his reverie. He continued saying. "When they were just in front of me they spoke to me and said why are you not in the Army like the rest of the boys. So I replied I'm sorry but I'm only sixteen. Then the one on the left said we've heard that one before it's just an excuse to shirk your duty. The next thing we know is that you'll be telling us you're doing work of National Importance. I replied certainly not I'm taking these documents to the bank. Then the one on the right said oh were so sorry for accosting you like this will you shake my hand please so that I may apologise. I certainly don't hold a grudge so I said certainly then as we shook hands I felt her press something into mine and on looking in my hand I saw a white feather resting there. The young lady then said that's for cowards who let other brave boys do the fighting for them. And with this parting shot they both walked off leaving me red faced and at a loss to understand what had just happened." Charlie looked disgusted as he said. "Take no notice of them foolish lasses they've no sense and even less understanding about what's happening, who are they to call people cowards?" Bob retorted. "It's alright for you to say that it wasn't you they called a coward. Maybe they were right I mean Billy Boy here is the same age as me and he's joined up", he looked at me stood there in my uniform. However I said to him. "It's different for me Bob you have a good job in the offices, me I was just a foundry labourer. You have a mother and father who love you. My mother and father are dead. And lastly I believe with all my heart that we must smash the Huns it's the right thing to do. So like Charlie says take no notice of people who say things like that you are not a coward Bob just a lad getting on with his life", and I patted him on the back in comfort as I could see that this had really knocked the stuffing out of him.

He said. "It doesn't matter any more about any of the things we've said that feather was the last straw I'd been thinking about joining up before and that incident tipped the balance." Charlie butted in saying. "What have you done Bob?" He replied. "Why the same as you two I've joined up." As he said this he looked at us with a challenge in his eyes. I said. "But you can't your mother and father will be heartbroken besides which when they find out they will get you out straight away for being under age. Any way how did you manage to get past the recruiters you look no where near old enough to enlist and I know all about that." He began his tale saying. "There was an old recruiting sergeant outside the Town Hall and I told him what had happened with the feather and all that and he was quite put out about it I can tell you and he told me we could not allow this to happen again and that it wasn't right that a smart young chap like me was being branded a coward." A tram clanked past and Bob stopped his tale for a moment then continued. "Anyway he told me what to say and he escorted me through the whole process and to tell you the truth I don't think I would have got in without him so there you are I'm in it now like you two. Don't worry I thanked the sergeant most warmly for what he had done and he told me the thanks were all he's and he shook my hand." I looked sideways at Charlie and his eyes met mine and I could tell we were both thinking the same thing how Bob could have been so daft. Charlie shook his head and said. "Well it's too late now but I can't understand what you were thinking you must have rice pudding for brains. Its one thing to join up like me and Billy Boy did that's because we wanted to but it's quite another to join up

because of two daft lasses.” I could see Bobs face go red as he replied. “I told you Id been thinking of joining up and I’m not bothered what you say what's done is done and that’s an end to it.” He looked a bit like a sulky child as he said this. Believe me it was not an attractive side to see of his character. Charlie said to him. “Let’s just hope you don't regret it then, because we can tell you its not all beer and skittles in the mob.” He retorted. “Don't worry I won't you don't need to worry about me”, and with this Bob turned on his heel and walked off. With nothing more to say I bid farewell to Charlie and we both went home. I got back to General Gordon Street and rang the bell. Rosie answered it and said. “I must get you a key while you're here at home on leave it will save you having to keep ringing the doorbell every time you go out.” She ushered me inside and I went into the front parlour as she smiled saying. “Oh by the way Helen's here she's with Ma I will go and tell her your back.” “No don't disturb her if she's reading to Ma I will see her later.” “Alright I will get you a bite to eat you must be starving.”, and with this Rosie hurried from the room and down to the kitchen. After a good meal of steak and kidney pie mash and veg I went back into the parlour and sat down in what I used to think of as my armchair I lit a cigarette and poured myself a glass of beer. I had just finished doing this when Helen Shaw walked into the room. I had been walking out with Helen for nearly a year now quite something in my book. She was a tall girl with black raven hair her eyes where a deep shade of brown she had a very trim figure and a most beautiful face and at eighteen she was a little older than me. She worked in Gardeners dress shop in the town and was very well thought of there, she lived with her parents and three brothers all who were younger than her in Sunnyhill on the far side of town. As always when I saw her she took my breath away I know we were both young and that at first I had thought of our relationship as platonic more like brother and sister. But that had changed over time to first affection and then love at least on my part. But I believed that she felt the same way and that now we were in that first awkward shy stage of our blossoming relationship.

She spoke saying. “Hello Billy Boy it's so good to see you.” I stood up and looked at her she looked a bit drawn but there was something else about her something had changed in Helen. There was a new type of determination that could be seen in the set of her jaw and something in her eyes that hadn't been there before. She held out her hands and I took them we kissed on the cheek and she let go of my hands and said. “Sit down and tell me all about what you have been doing since you got back. And if you don't mind may I have one of your cigarettes while we talk.” I was startled by her request but I was not going to make the same mistake as I had with Rosie and I offered her my packet. I told her about how Charlie and I had gone round to Bert's and about the arrangements for the funeral tomorrow. She seemed really pleased about having been invited to start off from Bert's home with the family and me. I then told her about Bob Reeves and his white feather episode and how he had joined up. She was appalled by what these two lasses had done to Bob but said she had heard a few of the women talking in the dress shop about other women in the town going round and handing out feathers to anybody they believed was of military age. There was a frown on her face as she said. “You would think they would have better things to do than chase after people with their ridiculous feathers.” Then out of nowhere she dropped a bombshell saying to me. “I must tell you Billy Boy that unlike those silly women I have chosen a more practical course of action to help in the war effort.” I sat there wondering what she was talking about as she continued. “You see I have volunteered for the nurses auxiliary they will train us to become nurses and to care for our sick and wounded soldiers.” She directed a smile at me, and carried on saying. “So like you I will be doing something I need to do something I just can't sit back while everybody else does their bit. You of all people must understand this, after all you volunteered and you are younger than me.” She took out a hanky and dabbed her nose before she said. “After all every one must pull together now that this war has started there must be no thinking just of ones self we must all do our bit for the cause don't you agree.” I looked at her in disbelief I had heard what she had said but I could not figure it out it did not make any sense to me. Why would she want to volunteer as a nurse? It sounded to me as though she had not thought it through but having pondered this I felt a quiver of pride run through me that she would want to help people less fortunate than she was herself was admirable. And even more so

when she could have just sat back and continued to work at the dress shop, however I could not help thinking did she know what she was letting herself in for I was determined to find out.

I said to her “Look Helen this might seem a good idea but have you thought it through properly?” She made to interrupt me but I persisted with my argument. “I know how much you want to help but you've never had to do what a nurse has to do.” I leant forward in my chair determined to hammer my point's home. “There is all the blood for one thing and there are other things as well that you have just never come across.” I could see a red patch begin to form on each of her cheeks and a flush start creeping up her throat as she said. “You listen to me Billy Lamb don't you ever talk to me like that again. Of course I have thought it through do you think this is just a silly little girl's whim or something?” I was about to answer her when she stopped me with a hand gesture saying. “I know I have led a fairly sheltered life so far but that has nothing to do with anything. There are young boys in the army just like you who have never done anything the likes of what they are doing now and nobodies saying you or they should not be there.” I was beginning to get a bit heated myself after hearing this. So I replied to her. “That's not the same thing at all look at me I have been on my own nearly since my parents died and I am used to roughing it and your not. You have been with your parents being brought up in a nice house and never having to fend for yourself.” I lit a cigarette and tried to calm myself down because this was getting out of hand and Helens face was getting redder and redder. Then she let fly saying. “How dare you talk to me like that, just who do you think you are, you're not my father and let me tell you I know exactly what I am doing so don't you worry about that.” I said. “I'm sorry Helen but you must see how much I care for you I don't mean to behave like an idiot but I can't help it.” She stared hard at me for a minute, and then she tucked a piece of hair back into place that had escaped from a clip she was wearing and this seemed to calm her down a bit.

I didn't really know what had just happened as she said. “Listen to me Billy Boy lets not talk about it any more I am going to join the nursing corps and that's final. So there's no point in you sulking anyway I must be off now I promised mum that I would be home early tonight.” She stood up and so did I we said our goodbyes and told each other that we would meet round at Bert's house tomorrow for the funeral. And with that Helen left me with a feeling that I just shouldn't have argued with her I could not think of anything more to do myself and so I went to bed and had an early night. The following morning I arose early and went down stairs Rosie was already up and she said. “I will make you a bit of breakfast if you like.” But I replied. “Not just at the moment love I will have a cup of tea and a smoke that will do me for now.” I really wasn't up to much this morning and wondered if maybe I was coming down with something but then again it might have been the argument that I had with Helen last night. Although I went to bed early I didn't get much sleep I was thinking about what had happened between us and also blaming myself for most of it why did I have to be so pig headed. Rosie looked sternly at me saying. “Right then I will go and shove the kettle on and make us both a cuppa but you listen to me Billy Boy I will make you a breakfast before you set off to Albert's for the funeral.” She stretched her hand out and caressed my cheek as she continued. “After all you cant be standing around all morning with no food inside you and no doubt there will be a great deal of beer and such to be drunk at the do after. So let's have no argument, and tell Bert that we are all thinking of him and his dad at this sad time.” She wiped a tear from her eye as she said. “Right go and sit in the parlour and I will be through with the tea in a minute”, and with this she walked back down the hall to the kitchen. I shouted after her. “What about Ma should I go up and see to her do you think?” I hadn't thought about her this morning and I could have kicked myself if I was stopping Rosie from looking after her just to make me a cup of tea. So I said again. “If you need to go up and see to her I can make my own tea and breakfast as well after all they teach us to look after ourselves in the army you know.”

Rosie came out of the kitchen again she wiped her hands on her apron and said. “It's alright Beth's with her at the moment”. I looked at her and my look must have conveyed something of the

apprehension I was feeling for Beth. Rosie held up her hand to me saying. "Don't worry about Beth looking after Ma it is just the medicine she needs and its good for Ma as well. I didn't know what we were going to do with her at one time but being up there doing what she can for Ma has fetched her back around." I replied to this saying. "Well if you say so then I am glad about it, because when I saw Beth last she seemed to have lost her way and I must admit I couldn't see which way she was going to pull out of it." Rosie replied. "Yes she was out of it for a bit and I must admit that she had me at the end of my tether when she was just moping around the place. But she is much better now I'm glad to say so don't you worry about Beth she will be alright. So now that's all sorted get off to the parlour like I told you and let me get on brewing the tea." And once more she disappeared into the kitchen while I walked down the hall and entered the parlour. After I had a cup of tea with Rosie she then went and made my breakfast, and although I was not very hungry I finished it off just to please her. Rosie cleared the breakfast things away and disappeared back into the kitchen again. I went upstairs and popped my head round Ma's bedroom door Beth was sat in a chair by the bed and Ma was still asleep. Beth nodded her head in my direction and I was just about to say something to her when she put a finger to her lips and smiled at me. I smiled back mouthed that I would try to pop in later and ducked back out through the door. I went to my room and put on my uniform Rosie had given it a sponging and a good brushing but I am afraid that khaki might be very practical for a uniform but it is not very smart. I finished doing my puttees up brushed my hair and went back down stairs to say cheerio to Rosie and to make my way to Bert's house. As I got to the bottom of the stairs Rosie was just coming along the hallway seeing me she said. "Is that you ready to go then?" I replied. "Yes I am going to meet Charlie at the tram stop on Coniston Road at nine o'clock". She looked at the wall clock saying. "Well you had better get moving then because you know what a worrier Charlie can be. Oh and don't forget to tell Albert and his father how sorry we all are for their loss." I kissed her on the cheek and told her. "Don't worry I'll tell them right then I'm off I will see you when I get back and try to get a rest if you can or your going to be ill yourself." I turned away walked down the hallway and let myself out the front door as I stepped outside it was rather parky to say the least and I was dammed glad that I was wearing my greatcoat as I set off for the tram stop.

Chapter Five

I arrived seconds before Charlie and as he walked up to me I could see that he was wearing his greatcoat as well. He held out his hand and I shook it as he said. "How are you Billy Boy its real brass monkey weather this it's not really a good day for a funeral but then again when is?" He cupped his hands and blew into them as he continued saying. "I don't like the look of the sky over yonder he said glancing at the steel grey sky that seemed to be approaching from over the back end of town." I replied. "You could be right Charlie it looks like it could get pretty bad." He stamped his feet and said. "Well there's not much we can do about the weather I just hope it holds off what ever it's planning till after the funeral. I mean Bert and his dad have enough to put up with today without the weather making things worse." I nodded my assent at this dour prediction from Charlie but still I prayed that everything would go smoothly today if only for Bert's sake I was pondering this when the tram rattled up to the stop and we stepped onboard. We arrived at Bert's and his father opened the door to us saying. "Morning lads it's good to see you it will mean a lot to our Albert for his friends and comrades to be with him today. In you come you must be perishing out there, go into the front parlour that's were everyone is and there's a little something to warm you up." He stood back and let us in and then shut the front door. We entered into the front parlour and there was quite a gathering there as I looked round I spotted Bert talking to Helen who had already arrived. She was dressed top to toe in black and carrying a black handbag and gloves the colour set off the paleness of her face. I drew Charlie's attention to them and we walked over threading our way through other mourners people were nodding to us and some even smiled. We nodded back though apart from

Helen Bert and his dad we knew no one there. We were held up for a moment by a very large matronly lady who was blocking our advance but we eventually managed to squeeze our way through. The large lady managed to convey her feelings which were of as much concern for us as an elephant would have for a flea and we left her there muttering about manners.

We shook hands with Bert and Helen and I must admit that even in this solemn occasion Helen looked beautiful if a little wan and tired. Bert said. "I'm so glad to see you lads I was beginning to get a bit swamped by all the talk and condolences. I'm sure some of these people actually enjoy a funeral its indecent I mean its bad enough from some of the family but then you get it from people you don't really know." His voice trailed off here and his face crumpled a bit. Charlie smiled and patted his shoulder saying. "Never you mind about them you have Billy Boy, Helen and your uncle Charlie here to see you right the old guard and we wont let you down isn't that right people." A small winsome smile appeared at the corner of Bert's lips and Helen said. "I couldn't have put it better myself Charlie's spot on there because we shall all look after you today and if any of these others upset you they will get what for", as she was saying this two spots of red appeared on her cheeks. I looked at her with new eyes this wasn't the old Helen that I knew so well this was a new Helen this was no longer a girl but a woman I suppose we had all had to grow up fast over the last few months. And I should have paid more attention last night when we were arguing if I hadn't been so set in my attitude I would have noticed the change then. And as I absorbed this new insight I found that I was quite taken by the new Helen and that I was hardly missing the old one at all. Bert's father had made his way through the crowd to were we were stood he invited us to the kitchen for a drink with him and on a day such as this we could not refuse. On our way through Bert was collard by an uncle of his he looked at us with an apology in his eyes and a look of martyrdom on his face. The next to get picked off was Helen who was waylaid by a group of ladies near the door who like most women needed to satisfy their curiosity about who she was. The rest of us that were left made it through the parlour door into the hallway with Bert's dad having to fend people off with a polite shake of his head. He said. "Just a minute lads", and he opened the door of the other parlour across from the one we had just come out of. As the door opened we could see a coffin on its bier and a small woman dressed in black bent over it praying then Mr Hall backed out and closed the door saying to us. "That's the wife's sister we will leave her to it", and he led us down the passage into the back room that we had been in last night. On the side board were bottles of whiskey and sherry, a bottle of port and bottles of Melstones beer he unscrewed the top off a bottle of beer and poured three glasses then he uncorked the whiskey and poured three tots out. He handed out the glasses saying. "Get the whiskey down first that should warm you up a bit water of the gods this stuff is", he looked at me shaking his head and warning. "You take care drinking it this time Billy Boy I thought you were going to choke last night.'

I looked at the pale amber liquid before saying "I'm sorry Mr Hall but it was the first time I had ever had any kind of spirit", I could feel the blush starting on my face. He laughed and replied. "Nay Billy Boy don't you worry about that there's a first time for everything, and I'm only joshing with you. If you don't like it then leave it, don't ever be afraid to say no, well bottoms up lads." And saying this he emptied his glass in one swallow and me and Charlie followed suit it didn't taste too bad this time. Then Mr Hall handed the beer to us and said. "This is the way to do it Billy Boy use the beer to chase it down", and with this he took a swallow of beer. We did the same and I could see what he meant by chasing with the beer it tasted very good. A movement caught my eye and in walked the scarred ginger tom from last night, this time it ignored its favourite perch on the windowsill, which must have been to cold for it. Instead it stalked over to the fire, it swished its tail twice turned in a circle a few times and settled down on the hearth rug. Mr Hall laughed saying. "I can see by your face that you've met Eric the Red", both Charlie and I looked at him with our mouths open. Then he laughed saying. "Oh I see the name it's a good one isn't it Mrs Hall named him he was always off on adventures and getting into scrapes." As he said this his eyes were looking back in time and there was a smile on his face. Then he said in a kind of afterthought. "He was always her cat she was the only one he would have anything to do with. He just puts up with me and Albert but

he really loved Flora he would drop little presents for her a dead bird or rat but mostly mice he's a jolly good mouser is Eric." Then he seemed to break out of his reverie as he pondered. "I don't know what he will do now come to think of it what will any of us do now that Flora's gone." He wiped his face with his hand and as it came away you could see the naked grief and pain that he was suffering. There was a bit of an embarrassing pause and then Charlie said. "Well yes it is a good name for him and I don't think I've seen a more war scared veteran in my life and he looks content enough to be sure." And with this last comment on the cat we went on to make small talk and Mr Hall said how nice he thought Helen looked given the occasion. And then Mr Hall said. "The real reason I wanted to see you back here was to ask a favour of you", he looked at both of us and then said continued. "Could I ask you both to act as pall bearers if you wouldn't mind there will be myself, Albert, my two brothers and you two?" We looked at each other and both nodded I replied for us. "Certainly and thank you so much for asking us it would be a great honour for us wouldn't it Charlie." He responded by saying. "Yes it would, and can I just say on behalf of both myself and Billy Boy how much we appreciate sir the way you have treated us like part of your family."

We all shook hands and Mr Hall enthused. "I am so glad that you have agreed and being Albert's best friends I hope also that you will be friends of mine and may I say what a pleasure it has been to have met you both and if the rest of the battalion is like you three there will be no stopping it. We best end on that note and get back to the front parlour because the hearse will be arriving shortly." We made our way back to the parlour and Mr Hall excused himself and went to see to his wife's sister. Albert was still with his uncle and a few more men he waved at me and Charlie to come over I told Charlie that he better go and that I would be there in a minute when I had rescued Helen who was still with the same women. She was stood there with a look of terminal boredom on her face and I couldn't help but feel extremely sorry for her. I got to her then made our apologies to the ladies and whisked her off over to where Bert and Charlie were standing. As we were on our way over she was a bit miffed to say the least as she said. "Where have you been leaving me with those old gossips I have been bored to tears. All you hear off them is whose dead or who's suffering from such and such. And then you get all there aches and pains and how much they have suffered and how there a martyr to this and that it's unbelievable." She snorted and then continued with her tirade. "Then to top everything off asking me why I'm not married yet, and wouldn't I like to be married? Did I like children and would I be having any? And it was always better to marry young as it saved being left on the shelf, I could have strangled them and I'm not kidding." I butted in and told her about Mr Hall asking me and Charlie to be pall bearers, and how pleased we both were at the honour he was doing us. She said. "Oh Billy Boy I'm so pleased for the both of you it shows exactly how much Mr Hall thinks of you. I was speaking to him before you arrived and I can't tell you what a very nice man he is so charming and he can't do enough for you." I replied with a grin. "Yes he's quite an admirer of yours he was telling me and Charlie in the kitchen how nice you were looking and I would say that he was quite taken with you", I teased. At these words her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink, and I could see that she was embarrassed so I let her gently off the hook and said no more about it and anyway we had arrived at Bert's little gathering.

Bert said. "Well hello you two I thought you'd got lost I was just about to send a search party out for you, or maybe you just wanted to be alone that might be it eh?" I stammered in reply. "No certainly not I simply went to save Helen from the clutches of those ladies over there", I turned and looked at the group of women then everyone could see who I was talking about. I continued. "They have had her cornered for hours and I just thought it was time to get her out of there." There was a tone of sympathy in his voice and then he said. "We'll never mind Billy Boy Helen these are my uncles Tommy and Oliver." We shook hands with them and I could see the likeness with Bert's dad. A smile was playing around Bert's mouth as we were introduced and he said to us. "I won't bother introducing my aunts to you as you've already met them or so I believe." I assured him emphatically that we had not but he continued. "Oh but you have", and I saw the light dawn in Helens eyes. I looked sickly at Bert and was about to say something but he carried on enjoying himself saying. "Yes you've met in fact you had to rescue Helen from them and their friends." Helen was blushing

furiously and I was mortified at what I had said but secretly glad I had not got the chance to say what I really thought of these women. I said to the group. "Then I can only apologise to your uncles for any offence I may have caused." Everyone watched me and Helen I didn't know what else to say and I was at a loss. Bert's uncle Tommy said. "Nay lad don't you fuss or you either miss, we know what our two wives and their pack can be like. Isn't that so Oliver tongues sharper than a fishmongers filliter they could give you a lashing with them faster than a workhouse cat could catch a mouse." Oliver didn't say much but he said. "Aye you were lucky to get her away with the skin still on your back so I'll take my hat off to you you're a braver man than me", and with that he proceeded to finish the beer off in his glass.

Before I could say anything, there was a commotion in the passage and Bert's dad came in saying. "The hearse is here can I have the pall bearers in the other parlour please. And can the rest of you make your way outside and form up in the cortege." I told Helen that I would see her in the church, and with that I followed the other pall bearers into the other parlour. The undertaker sorted us out by height telling us that this was the best way to distribute the weight of the coffin equally. I was paired up with Bert's uncle Tommy at the back as we stared at one another on opposite sides of the coffin. The undertaker said. "Right now listen to what I have to say to you place your hands under the coffin I will count to three and then raise it to shoulder height." We did as he said and lifted it up but there didn't seem to be a lot of weight in it. We all turned hoisting the coffin up onto our shoulders as we did so, and then at the say so of the undertaker we moved slowly out of the parlour and into the hallway. In slow time we passed down the hallway to the front door and from there out into the street as we got outside the first flakes of snow were beginning to fall and the sky was a dirty yellowy grey colour. Also the wind was beginning to pick up and so Charlie's weather prediction from this morning had come true. In the road I could see the carriage of the hearse shining in the light from its lamps, and four black horses' coats burnished brasses gleaming and black feather plumes standing straight on their magnificent heads. They were well aware of the weather and just wanted to get moving they pawed at the ground with their breath pluming like steam from a kettle in the bitterly cold air.

We reached the back of the hearse and lowered the coffin down to waist height the front pall bearers then placed it on the back edge of the hearse and we pushed it inside and stepped away. The undertaker placed a wreath of lily's on top of the coffin a tribute from Bert and his father. And then closing the back doors he went forward to take up his position at the front of the hearse and so lead the cortege. He gave the signal and off the hearse went with the pall bearer's close behind it and the rest of the cortege behind us. We wended our way slowly up the road towards St Saviours but by this time the snow was beginning to fall pretty thickly. We drew up outside the church were we unloaded the hearse and once more hoisted the coffin onto our shoulders and then we carried it inside. After a short service and some moving words by Bert's father for his dead wife we carried the coffin out to the waiting hearse for the last time. Then off we set in procession again for the town cemetery which was about half a mile away. The going was pretty rough as by this time the snow was coming down thick and fast and the wind was driving it and drifts were beginning to form. Some of the mourners were having trouble keeping up especially those at the older end. Along the road our funeral party struggled it really was the most awful weather as we got closer to Blackthorn Cemetery we faced an even bigger task. We were faced with Brady Brow a steep hill that led up to the cemetery. And this is were things turned into a bit of a farce for as the coachman urged the horses to begin the task of climbing the steep street up the hill we could see there was going to be trouble. The horses valiantly struggled up but half way from the top they just couldn't get the traction on the roads surface as it was now quite deep snow. The horses and the hearse were slipping and sliding about. And it was literally a case of all hands to the pump or in this case all hands to the hearse. As every one that could do got on the wheels of the hearse and shoved from the back to help push it up the hill. Eventually we managed to manhandle it to the top, and just ahead of us about fifty yards away were the gates to the cemetery by this time however the cortège was a stragging line leading back down

the hill. We waited at the cemetery gates huddled up against the wind while the stragglers caught up, but I could not help feeling sorry for Bert and his father at the dirty trick that the weather had played on them.

Everybody managed to get into some semblance of order again although more than a few were out of breath. The order was given and the procession proceeded on the last sad leg of Mrs Halls journey luckily the grave was at the bottom of the cemetery. I say luckily because the cemetery was laid out on another hill and the tombstones and mausoleums stretched up the hill and over the top in a jumble of stone and marble. And we could have been in big trouble if the grave had been situated further up the hill. We unloaded the coffin for the last time and now we could see the gash in the ground and the earth piled up that was the grave. The undertaker had laid out the lowering straps on the ground and we placed the coffin on them. He then explained how we should now lift the coffin with the straps and shuffle sideways until the coffin was suspended over the open grave, and we did this without any mishap I'm glad to say. As the vicar read the words over the grave we gently lowered the coffin down to its final resting place. This wasn't a hard task for as I said the coffin didn't seem to weigh anything really and we had hardly begun before we were finished. A cold blast of wind surged across the cemetery just as we finished and this gave the vicar the spur he had needed and he quickly finished the ceremony. People quickly took up handfuls of earth and threw them onto the coffin the wreath was thrown down to rest on its top. Then because of the worsening weather everybody quickly made their way back to Bert's in the teeth of what now was becoming a real winter storm.

We all got back to Bert's house freezing and brushing the snow from our coats and stamping it from our feet we got inside. It was lovely and warm in the house and some of the women went to the kitchen to make tea and to pass out the boiled ham sandwiches. Meanwhile Mr Hall and his brothers were circulating with bottles of whiskey filling glasses and passing them out. I had caught up with Helen and we were thawing out quite nicely thanks to the blazing fire in the grate which was throwing off a fierce heat and in no small measure to the whiskey. Charlie came over to stand with us and we were just making small talk when Bert joined us saying. "Thanks very much for acting as pall bearers a bloke couldn't ask for better mates. It was a pity about the weather but at least we got through it." He took a drink from his glass of whiskey as Charlie replied. "Yes thank god things were getting a bit hairy for a moment especially when it came to Brady Brow I thought we'd had it when the hearse stuck halfway up." A smile played on all our lips thinking about the episode where we had to push the hearse to get up the hill. Bert said. "Well like I say boys I don't think I could have got through without you and you too Helen you've been a real brick." Helen blushed again and replied. "It was a pleasure Bert I must say that I don't think that the lads could get a better friend than you either and as for your father he's a real gentleman." Just then Charlie shouted. "Hey up lads were not the only members of the battalion here look its Elijah and he's with Jimmy and Mickey Lord." We all looked over to the door where the three of them had just entered the room they made their way through to where we were. Bert's uncle Tommy shoved glasses of whiskey into their hands saying. "Here you are lads get that down your throats it will put hairs on your chest and keep the cold out."

Bert said. "Welcome lads its good of you to come I'm sorry I didn't see you before but you know what it's like I was in a bit of a daze what with the weather and all. Elijah replied. "Think nothing of it Bert you'd a lot on your plate today. The lads and I were at the back in the church and in the cortege and at the cemetery we hung back a bit. We just wanted you to know that we are here for you for we are your friends and comrades and we will always be there for one another." He looked at the Lord Brothers who nodded their heads in agreement. Charlie raised his glass. "Well said Elijah, I'm sure that's the way we all feel lets raise our glasses in a toast to friends and comrades of the Blackthorn Battalion." We all raised our glasses and said. "Cheers", and coming on top of the funeral and everything I think everybody had a lump in their throat and looking at Helen I could see she had a tear in her eyes. Bert's dad came across and Bert recounted what Elijah had said about the funeral and him and the Lord Brothers. Mr Hall said. "Well all I can say lads is thanks for coming,

and it's nice to know that our Bert has got such good mates. You're all a credit not only to the battalion but to your parents and the town as well and I'll feel a little better knowing that you'll be at Albert's side when the going gets tough because believe you me it makes all the difference." He then shook each of us by the hand and wished us well in the future he then took Helens hand and pressed his lips to it. He told her. "I can't leave you out my dear all I can say to you is if I had a daughter I could only hope she would be like you." Helen blushed furiously as she stammered. "Thank you so much Mr Hall I think that's the nicest compliment I have ever been paid." And I could see in her eyes that Mr Hall had won himself a feverent admirer. Later on we all took our leave of Bert and his dad his uncles and aunts who by then were all that was left, we had one final drink for the road and then wrapping ourselves up in our coats we made our way to the front door. Then the six of us shook hands with Bert and his dad and said our farewells we made our way towards the tram stop the lads said goodbye to Helen and I saw her across the road. She had to catch a tram going in the opposite direction from ours to get home. I said. "I will see you tomorrow when you come and see Ma Moffat, and you can have a bite to eat with us before we go to the dance." She replied. "Yes alright Billy Boy that sounds like a good idea it will save me having to trail all the way home and then come back again. I will tell my mother and father that I am having my tea with you I should think that will be alright." She had just finished saying this when the tram thundered up she gave me a soft lingering kiss and boarded the tram she sat in a window seat and I waved her goodbye as the tram pulled away.

I was still thinking about the tender kiss that Helen had given me usually it was just a peck on the cheek or lips. But this was different it was soft and tender and there was something else about it something that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Then the lads shouted to me that the tram was coming and I bolted quite sharply across the road to them. Above the noise of the tram Elijah said. "I hope your not thinking of going home just yet because the lads and I were thinking of having a quick snifter in the Intack Inn, and we would like you to join us wouldn't we lads?" Jimmy and Mickey nodded their head which believe you me from them was a sign of feverent ascent. I replied. "Well if you put it that way how can we refuse." Besides which I didn't really fancy going home yet anyway. Charlie agreed saying. "Yes let's get another drink in us after all this is the first time we have all met up since being on leave and what better place to have a few quite drinks than in the Intack its one of the best hostelries in Blackthorn." So that was decided a drink in the Intack Inn it would be and the way that things had gone today maybe more than one drink. And I thought to myself why not because like Charlie said this was the first time on leave that we'd all met and tomorrow was Christmas Eve so it was unlikely that we would see each other again before we went back to the battalion. So I said. "Ok lads this will be our Christmas drink together but just remember that I'm not used to drinking so much so later on you may have to look after me." Jimmy Lord said. "Don't you worry about a thing Billy Boy me and Mickey will look after you and if not Elijah will always be there for I've yet to see him get drunk no matter how much he puts away." The tram squealed to a stop with sparks flying from its wheels we all jumped off and made our way across the road to the Intack Inn the lights were on and it looked more than a touch inviting. We shoved open the vault door and walked in and as we did so we were met with a thick fug of tobacco smoke and a wave of heat from the fire. Getting father in the pungent smell of hops from the beer assailed our senses and so strong was it that I believed I might have been able to get drunk from just smelling it.

The Intack was an old coaching inn although having said this though the coaches were long gone it had been altered recently by Melstone's brewery who had knocked through into the old house next door. Out in the back yard there were still the stables and provision sheds and also the ladies and gents lavatories. The landlord behind the bar was a dapper man as proud of his hair as George was of his I had only met him a couple of times before but I had a sense of liking for him. He was a straightforward person who wasn't afraid to speak his mind. His wife was a beautiful looking voluptuous woman who in her own way was as outspoken as him. The vault was crowded as we made our way to the bar the landlord saluted us saying "Welcome lads; here put your money away I will get the first drink for you brave lads from the town's battalion." He filled five foaming tankards with Melstone's ale then passed them across us. Stood at the bar was a partially sighted old gent that

we knew he had been injured in an accident at the foundry which had left him nearly blind. We said hello to him and he raised his tankard in the direction he had heard our voices and took a deep draught from it in a salute to us. Also at the bar were the usual customer in at that time some had just finished work others were the type who worked for a day got paid and then came in the pub and spent what they had made all at once. They didn't want to go home to the wife and so sought solace in a tankard a smoke and a talk with their drinking acquaintances. The bubble of conversation washed over us and as we picked up our drinks and supped from them and a feeling of warm satisfaction came over us. After all what more did one need other than the company of good mate's a smoke and a tankard of foaming ale. Elijah toasted us with his tankard saying. "Cheers lads here's to the battalion", he took a deep draught of the ale and smacked his lips in appreciation as we toasted with him. He continued. "Ah that hits the spot come on lads don't lag behind the nights still young yet and we have time to put down a few more tankards before we go home."

In the corner of the room stood an upright piano and sitting banging out all the old favourite tunes was Samuel Brown who we knew well and who had joined the second battalion and was just doing the first part of his training under Colonel Jack. Charlie shouted over to him. "How the devil are you keeping Sam I see you're still playing the same old tunes?" Sam shouted back saying. "Come on over you lot I will show you how the second battalion celebrate their leave." We wandered over to stand around the piano we placed our tankards on the top and Sam played a few more tunes and then struck up Tipperary and then Pack up your troubles. By now the vault was buzzing and everyone was joining in and it had got as noisy as a parrot house there was laughter and good natured banter flying around the place and then we sang a rendition of Dolly Grey. Then Sam started playing the National Anthem and we stood at attention and belted it out with gusto. Drink and smokes were passed round and all of us including Sam were the worst for wear and a couple of the more ardent drinkers were passed out with their heads led in pools of beer on the tables. Our host the landlord Mr Tillman was as merry as the rest of us and had got a right earful off his wife who I didn't think was very impressed with her husband getting as tipsy as the rest of us. And then Mrs Tillman was shouting. "Time gentlemen please, let's be having your tankards and be seeing your backs going through the door." There were loud groans and cries of. "Stay open and just one more drink for the road." Then Mr Tillman said. "Yes lets all have another drink and more music Sam get tinkling those ivories." This earned him a clout from his wife as she said. "Don't you dare play another song Sam or you're barred and the rest of you lets be having you on you're way home instead of keeping decent people up." We said goodnight to the Tillmans and to Sam as we made our way out of the Intack then outside me and Charlie took our leave of Elijah and the Lord Brothers wishing them a Happy Christmas and pledging eternal friendship to one another. Then Elijah and the Lord Brothers caught their tram and Charlie and I walked off to catch ours still trying to wave at the fast disappearing tram.

We got off the tram at our stop and I said goodnight to Charlie and that I would see him at the church dance that night we then went our separate way. I walked round to General Gordon Street and then up the pathway where I was just about to ring the bell when I remembered that Rosie had given me a front door key and so I used it to get in. I crept up the stairs on unsteady legs I was trying not to make any noise so as not to wake the household up. I was just walking along the passage towards my room when Rosie came out of Ma's room she came up to me and said. "I can see we've had a drink then haven't we." I gave her a drunken smile as she asked. "How was the funeral, did you give Bert and his father our condolences?" I replied to her question saying. "Yes and they were grateful for them and they sent their best to Ma and to you and Beth." I then went on to give her a condensed version of what had happen during the day and night. I said. "Oh and by the way is it all right for Helen to have her tea here tomorrow night." Rosie replied. "That's fine we can all have a chat and then we can go down to the dance together, Beth's going to look after Ma while I get a night off." I said. "Right that's a date then it will do you good to get out and let your hair down for once." She smiled at me saying. "Right I'm off back into Ma's room and you get your self off to bed you look as though your going to fall asleep on your feet." I said good night to Rosie and wended my

weary way to bed and then I undressed and got into bed and was asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.

The next morning I came down stairs and had breakfast with Rosie and Beth then I dressed and set off to have a talk with my old mates at Dombridge's Foundry I went in and had a good chat with the lads and then I was summoned to the offices where old Mr Dombridge had tea served to me and had a chat with me as well. After this I called in at the Intack Inn again to see if there was anybody in that I knew but as I walked in I saw that the place was practically empty. Mr Tillman was behind the bar and looking a little worse for wear as he said. "How are you Billy Boy here have the first drink on me?" He pulled a tankard of foaming ale and then poured a whiskey for himself saying. "Here's mud in your eye lad", and he saluted me with the glass. I said to him. "I thought there might have been some of the lads in from last night." He replied. "I could do with nights like that all the time there's nothing like a good sing song to put money in the till and I must admit that last night was a very good one. So if you and your mates want to come down again the first round will be on me and welcome to it you are." I told him that I would tell the lads what he said but that we were all due back at camp soon and that it being Christmas Eve tonight we would probably not meet until we were going back on the train. He said. "Well I must admit that's a pity and to tell you the truth I can't help but feel a bit put out by what you've just told me. Because you lads and Sam were worth a fair bit in the till and like I said we could do with a night like that every night." I was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable with the way the conversation was going so I drank up and said my goodbye to Mr Tillman and left the Intack. I made my way back to General Gordon Street said alright to Rosie and went up to my room for a lie down for an hour before tea. On the way up I took a look in on Ma but she was sleeping peacefully so I didn't disturb her I left her room shutting the door quietly behind me and then went to my room. Rosie called me an hour and a half later telling me that tea was ready and that Helen had arrived.

I went down stairs and went in to say hello to Helen I kissed her on the lips then sat down at the table Rosie came in with the tea which was stew and dumplings in a large crock pot. She removed the lid and it looked and smelled delicious. We passed our plates down and Rosie ladled the thick brown stew and dumplings on to them and then passed them back. She said. "There's plenty of bread to dip into the stew so just help your selves while I fetch the teapot in and then we will be spot on." She disappeared for a moment back into the kitchen I made small talk with Helen until Rosie came back in carrying the teapot then she poured tea into our cups passing them out and saying. "Help yourselves to milk and sugar and get stuck into your tea before it gets cold." I replied. "We didn't want to start until you had come back and could eat with us." We added milk and sugar to our tea and then got stuck in to our stew. Helen said. "This is really delicious Rosie I don't know when I have enjoyed a meal as much." And I must admit that I had to agree with her as the stew was mouth watering in the extreme. I polished off the food on my plate with gusto and sat back rubbing my stomach. Rosie looked over at me and said. "Here pass me your plate Billy Boy there's plenty left and we don't want it going to waste." I replied. "Well alright then but just a tad I don't want to appear greedy." Helen joined in saying. "Don't be daft you're a growing lad and like Rosie said there's no point in letting food go to waste so eat up and have some more bread." After tea Rosie and Helen went into the kitchen to finish the washing up together I adjourned to the front parlour for a smoke. The girls then joined me when they had finished in the kitchen and they brought through a fresh pot of tea with them and we settled down to another cuppa a smoke and some friendly chat between us. About an hour had passed and I told them that I was going up stairs to get changed ready for the dance I left them to their own devices and went up to my room. I popped into Ma's room for a couple of minutes said hello to Beth and went over to the bed to say hello to Ma. She was propped up on pillows and looked a lot better tonight although she still didn't speak I could see that she recognized who I was and that was more than she would have done a couple of days back. I wished them both a Merry Christmas and kissed both of them on the cheek then I went to my room to get ready.

When I changed out of the old flannels shirt and jumper I had been wearing around the house into my uniform which Rosie had sponged and pressed for me. I had already had my bath cleaned my teeth and brushed my hair I looked in the mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door and the reflection that stared back at me was most presentable. And with this vision still in my mind I went back down stairs to join the girls. I walked back into the parlour and saw that Mabel Smith had joined Rosie and Helen and I said hello to her. She eyed me up saying, "Who's looking a smart boy then I must admit that you're cutting quite the dapper figure in that uniform. You'll have to keep an eye on him Helen or the ladies will be all over him." I blushed furiously for I was not used to being talked about in this way. And the girls on seeing this burst out laughing among themselves and I might have said something I would have regretted if the front door bell had not rung at that moment. Rosie stood up and went out to answer it and we could hear voices in the hallway then they came towards the parlour and in walked Charlie with Rosie behind him. I said, "Charlie I didn't expect to see you round here I thought we were meeting at the dance." He replied, "Yes we were supposed to but I thought I might as well call round for you and we could all go together is that alright?" Rosie left the room and came back a couple of minutes later with a tray on which was a bottle of sherry and a set of glasses she poured out sherry into the glasses passing them round and saying, "We might as well have something to fortify ourselves with before we go out into the cold." Helen said, "Mabel's coming to the dance with us I am pleased to say." Charlie added to this by saying, "Why not the more the merrier after all it is Christmas Eve and we can't have anybody left behind like Cinderella now can we", and a great grin lit up his whole face. This seemed an excellent idea to me as Mabel was the only one of the lodgers staying behind at General Gordon Street with us this Christmas time, the rest having gone off to celebrate with family or friends. But Mabel's parents were in India where her father was the manager of an indigo plantation so it was out of the question for her to go and see them and even more so now the war had started.

I was just about to point out what a good idea I thought it was when the door bell rang again, we all looked at each other not expecting anyone else, and Rosie went to answer it again. There were voices in the hall again and then a silence and then they took up again and came once more towards the parlour. All eyes were focused on the door when who should walk in but Albert Hall. I looked at him and said, "Well blow me down if it isn't Bert I didn't think you were coming but its right welcome you are." Everybody else also concurred with what I said and welcomed Bert like the prodigal son. Rosie poured him a sherry out and handed it to him with a smile and I could see she covered one of his hands with hers and gave it a little squeeze before sitting down again. Bert took a sip of his sherry then sat down and said, "I wasn't going to come out tonight but my dad told me to go on round to my mates and go to the dance with them he said there is no point moping round the house looking like a wet codfish. And he was right as I was coming over here I began to really look forward to spending Christmas Eve with my friends." I replied, "I really am glad you came this makes the night complete were all here together and what more could you ask for at this time of year." Everyone seconded what I had just said and then we all toasted each other and the laughter and merriment echoed through the room. Rosie looked at the mantel clock then stood up putting her glass on the table and saying, "Come on you lot wed better be going if were going to get into the church hall before it gets to crowded. We all went out into the hall and took our topcoats and scarves and gloves from the hall stand we bundled ourselves up in them and then opened the front door and stepped outside.

The snow was falling quite thick and fast as we set off down the street to the church hall we paired up me and Helen, Rosie and Charlie and Mabel and Bert. The girls linked their arms through ours and with much laughter and high spirits we began to sing carols as we walked. As we got closer to the church hall we could hear a brass band playing. We turned the corner and there was the foundry band playing and a line of carol singers with lanterns who were halfway through a rendition of Silent Night we stopped for a minute or two to join in and then went off into the hall. As we made our way inside we left our outside clothes in the cloakroom, and then carried on into the hall itself. There to greet us was the Reverent Loveday, and also my arch-nemesis Mrs Lucas she spoke to me

in that prim voice of hers saying. "Good evening Billy Lamb I hope you are going to behave yourself tonight I notice that the other rascalion George Drew is not with you." I thought this is enough and replied. "No he's not that rascalion as you call him Mrs Lucas is with the battalion and although we have not been sent to fight yet we surely will be in the very near future." She looked at me and for the first time I really saw how frightened she was that the way of life she had known was changing so fast and that it would never return to what she had known. She said. "Yes and I pray for you boys every night that the Lord will spread his arms around you as a shield and keep you from all harm." The Reverend Loveday joined in saying. "Amen to that Mrs Lucas yes indeed." I thanked Mrs Lucas for her prayers, and she told me to have a nice evening and I believe that she could finally see that I wasn't the young scamp that I had been that those days were gone and that shortly I might be killed defending my country. There were a few couples dancing as we entered the hall proper and the band that were playing were from the battalion who were on leave and our piano playing mate from last night Samuel Brown. He saw us and waved there were a few lads from the battalion there and we all greeted each other. Albert seemed to be more like his old self and was gliding in a waltz with Mabel, and who in my opinion was holding her a little too tight. Even Charlie and Rosie were on the dance floor they were not as good as Bert and Mabel but they were doing alright. Helen asked me. "Have we come here for a dance or to stand and stare at everyone else enjoying themselves?" I could not blame her for saying this to me but she knew that I hated dancing especially in public. I turned to her and replied. "Alright then we will have a dance on the next tune I promise", though I had said this just to sooth her but I dreaded having to dance in front of everyone. The waltz ended and people applauded the band the leader then announced. "The next dance will be the bunny hug take your partners please" and the band struck up the music. To my great relief Helen said. "Alright Billy Boy I won't make you do this one as I know you haven't a clue how to go about the dance and she smiled at me but then continued. "But you will dance the next one with me or I will start dancing with some one else there are plenty of lads to choose from."

I went off with this threat in my ears to get us a couple of glasses of punch none alcoholic that is this being a church dance and all. I came back passed Helen her glass and saw that Mabel and Bert were dancing up a storm so much so that a lot of the other dancers had stopped and were admiring them. I couldn't help being a touch jealous wishing that I had the same dancing aplomb as Bert. Helen would not be able to complain then and I might get some peace and quiet but I'm afraid it was not the case so I could see this being a night of me getting earache. The next dance started and it was a foxtrot and Helen and I took to the floor we glided round with Helen making me look better than what I was. But to tell the truth I was quite enjoying myself much to my amazement I think being able to hold Helen so close was a part of this feeling. But also since joining up I had more confidence in what I did and this showed through. Helen was impressed and whispered close to my ear. "This isn't a nightmare and you seem to be enjoying yourself I told you that once you got started everything would be all right." I replied. You were right but I think that's more to do with being close to you than anything else." She pulled her head back and looked deeply into my eyes then a smile flitted across her lips and a blush suffused her face and then she replaced her head close to mine. We had a few more dances and we were all enjoying the evening because both Charlie and Rosie and Bert and Mabel were getting on like a house on fire. The ladies decamped to the cloakroom and we took off outside to relieve ourselves on the way back a few of the lads from the battalion were outside the door and they had a bottle of whiskey with them. They shouted. "Here you are lads over here come and have a drink for Christmas with your comrades." And so we each took a couple of swigs then wished them the season's greetings and went back inside. The girls were waiting as we got back inside and we went and stood in a group with them. Helen said. "We have been talking and the dance is finishing in a moment, and we are having such a good time that we have decided to carry on with the night back at General Gordon Street." Charlie butted in shouting. "Hear, hear." And this earned him such a look of reproach from Rosie that he shut up straight away. Helen continued. "We will have a few drinks back there and Rosie is going to put a little supper on for us. Then we all thought wed go to the Midnight Mass because on this night of all nights it is so special." Albert spoke. "I'd like that a lot and what a really nice idea for you to come up with girls."

And with this he put his arm round Mabel's waist and gave it a squeeze and she didn't seem to mind at all. My eyebrows shot up at this intimate hug but Helen gave me a look that conveyed in it say nothing and mind your own business.

I looked at Helen while everyone else was excitedly talking about what was going to happen back at home and did anyone have a gramophone. Or what about the piano that would be good we could all stand round it and sing carols while Mabel played it. I turned to Helen and asked. "How are you going to get home so late, your parents will be worried about you?" She looked back at me and then said. "I'm sorry Billy Boy I should have told you that I'm staying with my auntie and uncle just round the corner from you in Wellington Street. I have told them that I am going to the Midnight Mass and that I would be in late so they have given me a door key. So you see there is really no need for anyone to worry. But it was really sweet of you to care thank you it means a lot to me." I must admit that I was a bit taken aback by her answer for she had just admitted that the plan to go back to General Gordon Street and then to church later had been in her mind all along. But it is like I have thought before Helen had changed a lot over the past few months since I had been away. She talked to me again saying. "Come on Billy Boy lets get back to the house and enjoy ourselves, but we shall have the last waltz before we go." And so we all had the last dance and prepared to leave but before we did every one sang the National Anthem and then we went round wishing the season's greetings to everyone we knew. After this we walked back arm in arm singing carols all the way back to General Gordon Street with the snow falling softly upon us. And to every one of the people who we saw on the way home we would wish a merry Christmas to and we would receive their blessings back as well as cheers for we belonged to the town's battalion and so were well thought of. We arrived at the house and entered it still singing and laughing, Rosie said: 'Right go into the parlour, you lads then you wont be under our feet. Meanwhile if Helen, Mabel can go into the kitchen and get the drinks. I will just go and check on Beth and Ma then I will put the supper together.' So she went upstairs and the other girls went to the kitchen while we blokes adjourned to the front parlour were Charlie passed out some cigars that he had been given. We lit them studied the end blew smoke at the ceiling and then lay back in our chairs content.

Helen and Mabel returned with a few bottles of beer and the bottle of sherry for them, glasses were set out and filled and then passed round our little social group. Rosie came back from seeing Beth and Ma upstairs she popped her head in and said. "I will just nip into the kitchen and put the supper together." Both Helen and Mabel announced they would help her as this would get things done twice as fast and it would mean that then Rosie could relax and join in the fun with us. A little while later they returned laden with plates on trays and began to set them out on the table Charlie said. "Well I must say you've done us proud girls there is enough here to feed an army and no mistake. And I must admit that I am more than a tad hungry all that dancing really builds up an appetite." Both Bert and I agreed whole heartedly with this statement and I was surprised to realise how hungry I really was. Set out in front of us on the table was a very tasty cold supper; there was cold chicken, some ham, cheese, half a pork pie and mustard and pickles to go with them. We thanked the girls and soon had them blushing with our wholesome praises. And while they picked at the food we set to like a pack of ravenous dogs and it wasn't long before there wasn't enough left to get a workhouse rat excited. Bert gave his judgment saying. "By George but that hit the spot and no mistake I feel much better now. Lets have some more ale, come on Mabel lets get a tune or two from the old piano." Mabel opened the piano lid tinkled a few of the keys to make sure it was in tune, and then went at the ivories like a Whirling Dervish. She banged out song after song and carol after carol which we all joined in with and pretty soon we were having a night to remember. And I thought when I came home on leave that this was going to be a miserable time for me but no it was the best Christmas Eve I could remember having. There was laughter and merriment and in between Mabel's piano playing there were parlour games. Not only that Charlie tried out a couple of magic tricks both which went hilariously wrong and left the rest of us helpless with laughter and Charlie more than a little red faced.

However the time came to start off down the road to the church for the Midnight Mass and once again we bundled up in our outdoor clothing and set off the snow was still falling only not as thick as it had been. Helen slipped her arm through mine and pretty soon the rest had followed suit I could hear Charlie and Rosie having a right giggle behind us and just enjoying the night. In front of us though Bert and Mabel were a bit more serious he whispered things in her ear and she would put her head on his shoulder and they would walk a few paces like this. Then they would stop turn in towards each other and look into each others eyes as they spoke. To me this looked like it was getting a bit to serious and why did they not just have a laugh like Charlie and Rosie. Then I thought to myself why am I bothered let them get on with it after all Mabel's parents were on the other side of the world and Bert had just lost his mother they deserved some happiness. Helen tugged on my arm as she said. "Penny for your thoughts." I replied. "There not worth mentioning I was just musing on things." She tugged on my arm again saying. "I know you were thinking of Bert and Mabel and the way things are going between them." I looked at her and replied. "Well yes I am I was a bit worried at first, but then I just thought they deserve some happiness if they can get it. I was also thinking a bit about George Drew as he used to have a bit of a thing for her." She looked into my eyes and smiled as she said. "You couldn't have things more wrong; she always liked Albert not George she was only in George's company so that she would get to see Albert. And she told me when we were in the kitchen that he thinks the same way about her." As Helen related this to me my mouth had dropped open and I thought to myself what a dark horse you are Bert and not just you but also Mabel. Well who would have thought it, and when George found out it would put his nose well and truly out of joint. Helen told me. "It's time to close your mouth Billy Boy unless you want to catch flies all night that is." I clamped my jaws shut and then as one Helen and I looked at each other and smiled. She lent her head against my shoulder as she told me. "I'm so glad for them they make a fine pair and you can tell by the looks they give each other the depths of their feelings. It is so romantic and it couldn't happen to a nicer couple nor could it happen at a better time."

She removed her head off my shoulder and we stopped and she said. "Just like me and you Billy Boy", she then gave me one of those soft kisses that made the butterflies in the pit of my stomach do an Arial display. And although this was the best time of my life I was a bit confused not to say scared I knew that Helen and I had moved on a hell of a lot. I mean it was not six months ago that my interest in girls was nearly none existent and me and Helen were only at the hand holding stage and that only now and again. Had we really changed so much in such a short time and then I thought yes we have and not only us but everyone else. The war had changed everything and although I was still young in terms of my years I had always been a mature lad I mean I have had to be what with losing my parents when I was so young. So I really shouldn't be so surprised with what was happening between me and Helen and beside which I liked the way things were between us now. Not only that I had found out that what I used to play hell with George for which was kissing every chance he got, I now found that I liked this experience as much as he had. But George seemed to have needed to kiss every girl he could and still did. For me there would only ever be Helen I did not need anyone else for whether she knew it or not she had captured my heart. We broke our kiss and looked at each other in amazement and just as we were doing this Charlie and Rosie came past, Charlie shouted. "Enough of that you two, save it for later when you take her home we are going to be late for the church service." And we pulled apart laughing and set off after them, we caught up to them by the church gates were they were waiting for us. Bert gave us a knowing look asking. "What happened did you get a little lost or something you must have done to let old Charlie slow coach here overtake you?"

Bert didn't wait for a reply but started a play fight between himself and Charlie and I thought I can't let them have all the fun so I joined in with them. The girls were laughing but told us to pack it in and to join them again as it was time for the service to begin. We pulled ourselves together although it took us a few minutes to stop joshing each other but at last we were ready and we entered into the church with the girls. As we entered the overall beauty of the scene in front of us took our

breath away the candle light threw gold flickering light on everything bathing the church in a soft glow. The choir were singing very low and sweet like larks from heaven and all this added to the magic of the night. Down at the front was set out the nativity scene with its large figures of the holy family, and the Shepard's, the wise men set in the stable. The manger with the baby Jesus laying in it all this was backlit to give the appearance that you were there and finally a large shining star was suspended above it. All this added to the ambience of what was happening as we took our seats on the back pew where George and I used to sit when we attended services. The singing stopped and the Reverend Loveday started the service. And I must tell you that it was a moving service with carols, and the telling of the Christmas Story mingled with prayers and a sermon that was very poignant at this time. Finally prayers were said for all our fighting men and for peace on earth and goodwill to men from all the allied nations at this time of trial. We left the service saying goodnight to the Reverend Loveday and telling him how much we had enjoyed it we shook hands with him wished the rest of the people we knew a Merry Christmas and set off home. I think we all felt the same that it was a great pity that the good time wed been having, was coming to a end but it was getting late and it was time for all good souls like us to be in bed. Charlie said his farewells to us all at the end of the street and we cheered him on his way until he reached his corner and then we carried on towards the house. I asked. "What about you Bert how are you going to get home at this time?" It was Rosie who spoke. "He's not going home not at this time he can have one of the spare rooms." Mabel joined in saying. "Your right Rosie we can't have him walking home in this weather when it's so late and there's plenty of room at home yes he can stay the night at our house."

I looked at them saying. "Well that's settled then if that's alright by you Bert because it doesn't seem to me as if they are giving you much choice." He replied. "That's alright I was going to ask if I could stay at your place as I really didn't fancy walking all the way home." I said. "That's champion we'll be able to have breakfast together in the morning before you go home." We were just getting to the gate of the house and I said. "Wait in the parlour for me Bert and we will have a final smoke before we retire for the night." Helen elbowed me non to gently in the side I was just about to give her the rough end of my tongue when I saw the look on her face. I looked across at were Mabel and Bert were waiting to follow Rosie up the path to the front door I saw the look on both their faces and realised why Helen had nudged me so I said. "Never mind about the smoke Bert I might be a little late back after I take Helen home." The look of relief on both their faces was a joy to behold as he replied. "Right oh Billy Boy it's a pity but I will see you in the morning." With that they all wished us a Merry Christmas and disappeared through the front door of the house we waited until it closed and then walked on towards Helens uncles' in Wellington Street. As we were walking arm in arm down the street Helen turned to me and said. "That was nice of you Billy Boy to give Bert and Mabel some time together I am sure they will appreciate it." I turned towards her and replied. "I really am thick imagine me thinking Bert would sooner have a smoke with me than spend time with Mabel. It's a good job you elbowed me before I made an even bigger fool of myself." She smiled at me and gave me a quick kiss saying. "That's your reward for being such a good friend now come along let's get our skates on, because although my aunt and uncle know I will be late they will still be worrying." We put on a bit of speed and were soon nearly at the gate of her aunt and uncle's house, Helen stopped and faced me then she put her arms around me and gave me the most amazing kiss of the evening. My stomach felt like a football that had just been kicked over the stand and then as our lips disengaged I felt a sense of awe but also something magical. And the feeling didn't leave me as Helen wished me Happy Christmas and told me she would see me before I went back off leave. I watched her safely into the house were it looked like her relations had waited up for her as the lights were still on. And then I walked back to General Gordon Street with a heart as light as a feather and my soul soaring like a bird. Because in that last kiss I had experienced true love or at least that's what I believed it must be.

As I reached home and opened the front door my emotions were all over the place, and I didn't notice anybody as I made my way to bed. Maybe if I had been more interested I might have wondered about Bert and Mabel, but then again probably not. For after what had happened tonight I

had sympathy with all people who were in love. And as I got ready for bed I knew that tonight I would dream of everything that had happened but most of all I knew that I had witnessed the magic of Christmas. For on this night of all nights I knew that I loved and was loved and for that I thanked God. I woke up Christmas morning with a wonderful feeling in my belly it was as I got out of bed that I felt how cold it was in the room so I quickly got dressed. Then on opening my curtains I saw how lovely and blue the sky was and with the snow that fell last night as a backdrop it just looked like a Christmas card scene. I washed my hands and face and then set off downstairs where I would have a quick cup of tea and a smoke and get some hot water for a shave. As I got on to the landing of the stairs I heard a footstep behind me I turned and saw it was Bert, I wished him good morning and Merry Christmas and he did the same to me. We walked down stairs together and went into the kitchen I said. "The first thing we want is a brew to set us up then we will be ready for anything", and I put the kettle onto the hearth. The next thing I did was find the teapot and the caddy; I then went into the larder and got the milk. Bert who was watching me asked. "Is there anything I can do?" I looked back at him and replied. "No I don't think so, oh yes wait a minute get a couple of pint pots from over by the sink will you", Bert did as I asked. By this time the kettle was boiling and I poured a little water into the teapot and swirled it round then tipped it down the sink. Bert looked at me doubtfully and asked. "What are you doing that for?" I looked at him as though he had two heads and replied. "Why I'm warming the pot you silly sod that's how you make tea."

I went back to the table and spooned tea into the pot poured boiling water in and waited for the tea to steep. 'Pour some milk into the pint pots will you Bert', I told him, and then when he had done that, I poured out the tea and it was strong enough to stand your spoon up in it. We each spooned sugar into our pots and then carried them through to the front parlour with us. We sat down took a refreshing drink from our pots and gave a sigh of pleasure, I offered Bert a cigarette from my packet and we sat back and smoked and drank our brew's. Bert said. "I should be going in a minute Billy Boy." I replied. "I thought you were having breakfast with us." He looked down at the table saying. "I was going to do but by the time I have walked home got washed and shaved had a bit of something with my dad it will be time to go to church. So I hope you understand if I leave in a moment." I told him that I did but then I asked "What about Mabel, will she understand you leaving." Before he could answer a voice came from the doorway saying. "What is there that Mabel should understand?" I looked up and there she was stood in the doorway just about to enter. She smiled as she said. "Close your mouth Billy Boy you look like a demented codfish on a fishmongers slab." Then her attitude seemed to change to something more nervous as she looked at me saying. "The thing is and I hope you and the rest won't mind but Bert has asked me to spend Christmas Day with him and his father." I looked hard at Bert here was a turn up for the book but what the hell it was none of my business. I could not help thinking however that Bert's dad was in for a shock no matter how pleasant a one, mind you knowing Mr Hall he would just take it all in his stride. Bert said. "You do see now Billy Boy why we have to get going early I thought we would breakfast with my dad. That will give him and Mabel a chance to talk and get to know one another." Although I had been completely taken aback I agreed with Bert saying. "Yes that seems like a good idea after all I recon today will be pretty quite round here what with Ma Moffat and all I should imagine it will be just me and Rosie for dinner so you two love birds go right ahead."

To tell the truth the thought of rattling round the house did not interest me much but everybody seemed to have plans Helen was spending the day with her family of course and I think the thought of not seeing her had me depressed already. Bert offered me one of his cigarettes I took one and lit it I blew smoke up at the ceiling. Bert suddenly exclaimed. "Come and have your Christmas dinner with us I am sure dad won't mind invite Rosie as well there will be enough for everyone. My uncles and aunts will be there as well and I know they would be glad to see you again." I thanked Bert but replied. "Sorry Bert and thanks for offering but I know Rosie will want to be here today with Ma, and I believe it is also my place to stay here after all these have been like my only family for a long while." Mabel smiled and said. "That's really sweet of you Billy Boy and I know that Mrs Moffat and Rosie and Beth look on you like family as well and Rosie will appreciate

you staying with her.” Bert added to this by saying, “Well if you’re sure you can’t come round to our place then all I can do is wish you the season’s greetings and say have a good day Billy Boy.” Having said this he stood up and shook my hand then he turned to Mabel and said, “Are you right love we had better get going or dad will wonder where we are?” He turned saying to me, “I will see you later on Billy Boy and again I wish you and the rest of the household the season’s greetings, and give Rosie my regards and tell her I’m sorry I missed her.” Mabel then came up to me and kissed me first on one cheek saying, “That’s for you”, then on the other cheek, “and that’s for Rosie Mrs M and Beth give them all my warmest regards and that includes you as well Billy Boy.” I saw them out into the hall where Bert got his greatcoat from the hall stand along with his scarf and gloves, he wrapped himself up took his cap off the hook put it on and they were ready for the off. I opened the front door to see them out and the sun shining on the snow was dazzling, I was right when I got up this morning it was a beautiful day. We all shook hands once again on the doorstep and with cries of Merry Christmas from them they were off down the path and on their way to Bert’s house.

I closed the door and turned back into the empty hallway, it seemed dull and lifeless and I could feel the misery washing over me now that I was alone. But I gave myself a mental kicking I had never been one to mope or to get depressed and I knew it wasn’t time to start now. I know I thought I will have some more tea and stick on a bit of breakfast for myself that will cheer me up and then after that I would get ready for church. I was just cooking breakfast when Rosie walked into the kitchen and said, “Good heavens I must be seeing things Billy Boy Lamb actually cooking.” She had lost none of her cheeky charm and I replied, “They teach you to be self reliant in the army now go and set the table and I’ll make yours as well.” Quick as a flash she responded with, “Oh my word it must be Christmas Day and is this you’re present to me making my breakfast I must be honoured”, I shook my fist at her and she left chuckling to herself to set the table. We sat down to eat our breakfast when I told Rosie that Mabel had gone with Bert to spend the day but she didn’t seem surprised at all. She said, “I thought she might and why not you could see there was something special between them last night and she confirmed it later by telling me and Helen in the kitchen”. She popped another bit of bacon in her mouth, and chewed on it thoughtfully and then a smile spread across her face as she recalled something.

She looked at me and said, “It was a lovely night last night wasn’t it?” She went on, “I thought it was the best night that I have ever had what with the dancing and the singing, oh and didn’t the church look beautiful all sparkly and the candlelight giving off that lovely glow” and now the smile on her face had turned radiant. I decided that I would tease her a bit so I asked, “Was it looking that way because you were with Charlie?” She replied, “Oh no he’s alright but he’s a bit of a one a good laugh and that but that’s about all he thinks to much of himself you can tell by the way he pushes himself forward.” So I asked, “Not boyfriend material then is that what you’re saying?” She laughed at me as she replied, “Definitely not like I say he is to full of himself besides which there are other lads about but a lot of the best ones are taken”, and as she said this she gave me a thoughtful look. We cleared away the breakfast things and took our tea with us into the front parlour where I lit up a cigarette and offered the pack to Rosie but she declined. Ever since that look she gave me over breakfast I knew that I would have to tell her about what had happened to me last night I would need to tell her about my feelings and everything else. And so I started and I didn’t stop until I had laid everything out for her and then I laid back and waited for her to reply. She looked at me with what I thought was pity in her eyes and said, “Poor Billy Boy you have got it bad but you were the last one to see it.” I was a bit put out by this and shot back at her, “Well I’m so sorry that everyone knew before me what would you like me to do about it”, and I don’t think the sarcasm in my voice was missed. Now she tutted and looked straight into my eyes as she replied, “It’s not like that at all its simply that you were to close to see it until it reared up and smacked you in the face. And I am really glad that you have found love especially with Helen because I know she loves you too.”

She smiled at me and then the smile faded to be replaced with a look of caution as she continued. "Listen Billy Boy even though all this is marvellous you must take things easy with Helen, please don't go proposing or anything silly like that. Because she is very strong willed and she will do what she has said she will do first and that is to become a nursing auxiliary. And I am afraid that if you go rushing in too fast that it may ruin things for both of you and that would be a great shame." I blushed a bit because I had been dreaming about me and Helen getting wed last night but now that Rosie had laid it out I saw what she said made sense. Not that I had been about to propose or anything, bloody hell I had only just found out I was in love with the girl, unlike everyone else it would seem. I replied. "Don't worry Rosie I won't be doing anything daft I don't want to rock the boat." She sighed and said. "Make sure you don't because people get some daft ideas in their heads when there are things like wars going on you've only to see them moving pictures coming out of America to know people go bonkers when times are hard." So I promised her I wouldn't be like anyone in those moving pictures which I think Rosie regarded as real life happenings and she seemed satisfied, we then got changed and went to church. After we got back from church we spent some time with Ma and Beth and I gave them my presents a nice shawl for Ma and some handkerchiefs for Beth. She kissed me and thanked me and said they would come in handy as she was always losing her hankies. I looked at Ma and although she did not say anything a tear rolled down her cheek and I could see that she really liked her shawl. And then we had our Christmas Dinner Beth and Ma had theirs up in the room while Rosie and I had ours downstairs and although we had goose with all the trimmings it was a pretty subdued meal. Afterwards Rosie did the washing up and then we had a glass of port in the parlour and chatted about this and that then she went off to do some things of her own I went upstairs to my bedroom to open the presents that I had got from under the tree this morning.

There was an assortment of stuff Ma had got me some cigarettes, Rosie had knitted me a scarf which seemed appropriate as I had got her a pair of gloves. Beth had got me a penknife which I must thank her for as it would come in handy. And then I opened Helen's, and staring at me out of the paper was a very good cigarette case that was silver and had my initials on a little shield on the lid. I was overjoyed with it as I had never been given a present like this in my life before but at the same time it must have cost her a lot and I knew she didn't earn all that much. I had bought her a small locket to put our photos in but it had cost me nowhere near as much as what Helen had spent and now I was feeling a little guilty. However I knew that she would have chosen it carefully and that she would have not bothered about the price so I put my guilty feelings to the back of my mind and filled the case with cigarettes. Then I had a lay down for a while until it was time to go down for tea it was the same again at tea as it had been at dinner Beth and Ma eating up in her room and myself and Rosie eating downstairs. We had cold leftovers for tea which tasted all right, but if anything the atmosphere was even more subdued than what it had been at dinner. After we sat in the front parlour and chatted again, Rosie had some tea and I had a couple of beers. She admired my cigarette case and we had a quite if peaceful evening reading until it was time to retire. Rosie kissed me on the cheek and said. "Don't ever change Billy Boy because I love you just the way you are", and with that she turned and went off to bed. I followed her up shortly but did not go straight to my room instead I went and sat with Ma for a bit Beth had gone to bed because now Ma was not as ill as she had been at first and could be left to sleep through the night. I noticed how shrunken she looked and how much more frail she seemed than the feisty woman I was used to and it seemed to me that this war already had a lot to answer for especially in this house. I left Ma's room after about an hour and went straight to bed and there I slept soundly until the morning I don't think I dreamed but if I did I know it would have been about Helen and me.

Boxing Day dawned another beautifully fine morning and I went downstairs to find that a boy had delivered a note from Mabel saying that she was having such a good time that Bert's dad had asked her to stop another night with them. And that they were all going on an outing to a show at the Palace Theatre and then out for tea. Well that had put the kibosh on it Bert wouldn't be coming out with us today I was due to meet Charlie at the tram stop after breakfast, and then we would go and

get Bert and decide what to do from there. When I finished breakfast I walked down to the tram stop and met Charlie I told him about Bert not coming and he rolled his eyes. He said. "God but he's got it bad, fancy letting your mates down. Ah well cant say as I blame him she's a nice girl is Mabel anyway what are we going to do now?" We had a smoke while we waited for the tram to come and he admired my cigarette case and when I told him it was a Christmas present from Helen. He said. "You're another lucky blighter aren't you I can't seem to get a girl for love nor money. Mind you I think I might be in with a chance with Rosie, after all we were getting on like a house on fire last night." I didn't have the heart to tell him what Rosie had said last night about him, and so I changed the subject instead and asked. "Shall we go to the park first for a stroll?" He replied. "Yes why not it's a beautiful morning lets take in the fresh air and have a nice cup of tea and a bun while were there." He didn't get time to question me again about Rosie as the tram came clanking up at that moment and mightily relieved I was for that. We got off at our stop and walked across the road and through the gates of Queens Park; there were a few people about strolling in the sunshine and taking in the fresh air. And all though it was pretty chilly if you were wrapped up well enough it was a nice day for it. We walked on and the park was covered in snow there were children having snowball fights and father off at the top end of the park were the hill was there were sledges flying down and we could hear much screaming and merriment.

We had a cup of tea in the café which was usually closed in winter but the town council had opened it back up due to the amount of people who were enjoying the winter activities. We had spent a couple of hours walking round and having our tea we had even joined in a snowball fight with some kids but had come off the worse. So now we were heading out of the gate to catch a tram down to the Kings Head to see if a mate of Charlie's who had joined the Fusiliers was having a drink in there. As we got down to the gate I noticed a figure coming in with a woman and small child and I thought to myself I know that figure. It was Elijah Mack and his wife and child we greeted each other warmly shaking hands with Elijah and his wife and paying compliments to Mrs Mack on the child. Elijah said. "How's it going boys did you have a nice Christmas?" He turned to his wife and smiled. "Me and the missus are just blowing the cobwebs away it's a beautiful Boxing Day isn't it?" We agreed with him that it was a lovely crisp morning for a stroll. He continued. "I thought I might walk off some of the food I've eaten since I got home let me tell you Martha here is a wonderful cook and has been spoiling me rotten." His wife blushed a bit and reined in the small child as I said to Elijah. "Don't you have another lad where's he off scampering around the park?" Elijah replied. "Yeah I have another one called Tommy but he has a bit of a cold at the moment so we have left him with the grandparents it's a pity for the poor might as it has really put a damper on his Christmas." His wife nodded her head in agreement and said. "He will be alright we just thought it a bit cold to fetch him out today but he will play with his toy round at his gran's." Elijah looked at us and asked. "So where are you off now lads I suppose it will involve a few drinks and the like and where may I ask is Albert?" So we told him all about Bert and Mabel and the fact that he was spending the day with her and his family. Elijah replied with a grin. "Bloody hell the things you lot do get up to it makes me miss the young single life again." His wife butted in saying. "Being single again would be no good to you Elijah Mack as there'd be no one to darn your socks or make your meals or see to you when you were ill." Elijah smiled ruefully and replied. "No your right my love I wouldn't swap you for all the tea in China", and he beamed at her. We said goodbye to Elijah his wife and nipper and went on down to the Kings Head Charlie's friend wasn't there so we got a couple of tankards and settled on a table in the corner from where we could see the door and the bar area. About half an hour later a bloke in uniform walked in and Charlie said. "That's Ted Smith you can't miss him can you?" He was right about that as the bloke in question had to be about six foot tall and as thin as a rake, I could see as he took his cap off that he had a head of flaming red hair, and like most red heads a very pale complexion he looked almost anaemic. Charlie shouted him over and they looked really pleased to see each other, I was introduced and we had a couple more ales together, but you know how it is I felt like I was intruding. Besides which I didn't really want to be there drinking all day, and these two were already thick as thieves. So I stood up and told them I must be off, Charlie tried

to persuade me to stay, but he didn't try that hard, and as I walked out I looked back and they were deep in conversation again and were not missing me one little bit.

I caught the tram back to General Gordon Street, and when I got in Rosie made me a sandwich which I ate stood in the kitchen with a glass of milk. After this I went up to my room and led on the bed for a while thinking I would get a bit of shut eye before tea. But sleep was hard to come by and I tossed and turned I couldn't understand what was going on and then suddenly it hit me. I was like Bert only he was with Mabel and I wasn't with Helen and I knew then that I had to see her no reasoning could stop me. I knew it was foolish but it didn't matter I had to be with her at all cost I could take no more of this torture. I dressed again and went down stairs I told Rosie not to bother with any tea for me but I didn't tell her that I was going to see Helen I don't know why as usually I confided most things to her. I went out of the house and down to the tram stop I got on the tram when it came, and I just knew that as soon as I could see Helen and be with her everything would be alright. I fretted and fidgeted and cursed the tram because I did not think it was going fast enough, it seemed to take forever to reach Helens stop but at last it got there and I made my way to her house. As I walked down her street I became more and more unsure of my position for what had seemed like a good idea at the time now jumped up and bit me. For a start I had never met Helens parents and did not even know if they approved of their daughter seeing me or in fact if they even knew. I got closer to her house and my feet started to drag I had cursed the tram for not going fast enough now I wished it had taken a lot longer to get here. It was turning dark now and the lights were coming on in the houses, I got to the house and with some trepidation entered through the front gate. It was a fairly large house and had its own front garden that was covered in snow. I could now see Helen and her parents sitting in a front room through the large bay window her father was stood up and seemed to be pouring drinks from a decanter. At this minute as I was stopped on the path he chose to look up through the pane he looked a bit taken aback but only for a moment. I didn't know what to do I was plagued with indecision he said something and Helen came to the window I could not judge her expression whether she was pleased to see me or mortified. She left her father's side and I walked up the rest of the path with her father still watching me, then the door was opening and light was spilling out onto the path. I tried to judge what Helen was thinking by looking at her face, but there was neither joy nor anger more a kind of wariness there. Then she asked. "Billy Boy what are you doing here as something happened to Mrs Moffat or to one of the others?" I could see that her face had changed and was now cloaked in worry as she pondered what had brought me to her house. I felt like a fool now standing here in front of her I also felt ashamed that I had worried her needlessly so I replied. "No everyone is fine I just had to see you my Christmas wasn't up to much without you. And I wanted to thank you for your present it's the best I've ever had but you shouldn't have spent so much on me."

She smiled at me and replied. "Oh Billy Boy you are silly I would have come round tomorrow and as for the cigarette case it was what I wanted to get you and I'm glad you like it. And I must thank you for the present you got me and to my utter joy she pulled the locket I had got her out from around her neck. She opened it and showed me the two pictures inside it one of me and one of her then she closed it and put it back inside her blouse. Anyway come on inside mother and father would like you to stay for tea." I looked at her and didn't know what to say but finally I said. "No thanks I'm fine I only wanted to see you and talk to you and I have so now I'll be off and I will see you tomorrow." Then from inside the house a voice shouted. "Come on Helen invite the young man in out of the cold and let's have a look at him give him the once over so to speak." Helen turned to me saying. "Well come on then my father has spoken and he wont take no for an answer." So rather reluctantly I stepped inside here Helen took my hat and greatcoat my scarf and gloves and then showed me in to the room whose window I'd been looking through. As I got into the room Helens father came over and shook my hand and said. "Now you would be who precisely?" He was a rather tall stern looking man but as I looked more closely I could see a twinkle in his light blue eyes and I noticed that his dark hair was still full on his head. I stammered. "My name is Billy Lamb sir and as you can see I'm a soldier at the moment with the town's first battalion." He replied. "Yes I have

noticed that and may I just say how proud the town is of all you young volunteers. But I take it you are also a friend of my daughters as well though you are one that she must have been hiding because I don't believe we've ever seen you before have we?" All of a sudden Mrs Shaw who was sat in a chair by the fire said. "Stop badgering the lad Henry I'm sure its not he's fault that he's never been introduced to us." I looked more closely at Mrs Shaw she was a beautiful woman and I could see where Helen got her looks from, I could not see how tall she was as she was sat down. Her bearing however was very natural and her blonde hair and grey eyes seemed to glow at me from where she sat. Helen nodded at her saying. "Thank you mother the last thing Billy Boy needs is to be bullied after all he is a guest in this house." Mr Shaw looked much chastised and told me. "I am sorry lad it is enough to know that you are a friend of Helens and that you have volunteered to fight as well. Let me pour you a drink and we will have a talk before we have tea. You are stopping for tea aren't you?"

He poured drinks for everybody and we all sat down and had a pleasant chit chat about the war what was happening in the town. Helen told her parents about Albert's mum dying and told them that Mrs Moffat treated me as family, they knew about what had happened to her sons through Helen going and looking after her. Mr Shaw asked me when I thought we would be deployed, I told him we had no idea at the moment but that we were due to move down South sometime in the New Year. We then had a very nice meal, and some small talk round the table, and then we retired back into the front room and had another drink. Mr Shaw offered me a cigar which I took and we both lit up, we had a mellow smoke and some more talk I told them of how I was an orphan and how I had worked in the foundry. And then it was time to go I said goodbye to Mr and Mrs Shaw and they told me that they had been very glad to meet me and hoped to meet me again in the future they also said that they were glad that I was Helens friend. I shook hands with them and Helen showed me out she smiled at me and handed me my outer clothing I had wrapped myself up and she had opened the door and I was stood on the stoop. Helen put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me full on the mouth again like she did the other night as she said. "You went down well with my parents and I'm so glad that you came I really mean that Billy Boy because I have never seen them take to someone straight off like that. I won't see you tomorrow now but I will be down at the train station the day after to see you off so don't worry." I told her how nice it had been to meet her parents and said I couldn't wait to see her again even if it had to be at the station and I would be returning to the battalion. I set off down the path walking backwards and waving to Helen as I went she was still standing on the doorstep as I turned went through the gate and turned down the street. I was really happy as I made my way to the tram stop happy that I had gone to see Helen and also happy that I had got on with her parents so well. It was like my father used to say you have to grasp the moment in both hands and not be afraid well I had done that and it had paid off I was glad to say.

The next day I saw none of the lads but Mabel returned and told us what a good time she had with Bert and his family. I went up and sat with Ma for a bit and told her that I would be off in the morning I also said again how sorry I was about Jack and Charlie and that I hoped Charlie would be well soon. I also told her that she must get better as well so that she would be on her feet when he came back home and she would be able to mother him like she always did. She looked at me and I thought I saw a smile trying to form on her lips when I left I kissed her on the forehead and said my goodbye. I can still remember her propped up on her pillows looking at me going out the door and tears running down her cheeks, and I knew she could understand but never a word passed her lips. The rest of the day I packed my kit Rosie had done my washing and I would be returning with all my kit clean so that was one less job to do when I got back to the camp. I sat that evening with Rosie, Mabel and Beth and we chatted about the times we had in this house before the war started and how everything had now changed. Rosie and Mabel went on about how good a Christmas it had been for them and how much they had enjoyed Christmas Eve. I agreed with what they said and we covered every aspect of that night reliving it bit by bit so there was a lot of laughter that echoed through the old place. Rosie had set out beer and a cold supper in my honour and we had a fine time of it this being my last night. And as I sat there smoking and having a beer and listening to the girls chattering

about this and that I could not help thinking what a leave this had been for me I had found out that I loved my girl and that she loved me. I spent the best Christmas Eve that I had ever had in the company of my comrades and friends and I had received the best present that I had ever been given. I had met my girl's parents and got on well with them so all in all I could not fault what at first I thought was going to be a terrible leave but which turned out to be the bee's knees. I got up the next morning and after completing my ablutions I took my kit down stairs Rosie made me a huge breakfast which I finished off with relish. I took my goodbyes of the girls kissing them all and telling them how much I would miss them, the girls were all sobbing and I was not so far off myself. Beth gave me a packet of sandwiches for the journey and I put them in my small pack along with the cigarettes that Mabel had given me and the bottle of beer that Rosie had tucked into my pack.

Then it was off down the tram stop laden down with kit to meet Charlie Slater, we would meet Bert down at the train station. As I strolled up Charlie said: 'How are you Billy Boy ready for the scrum at the station. God all those women crying it will be like the flood we will need Noah and his sodding ark to survive.' I looked at Charlie and couldn't help thinking this was a case of sour grapes, and he was only complaining like this because he hadn't got a wife or girlfriend to see him off. He went on, 'my mother wanted to come down and see me off but I told her I was rejoining the battalion not going back to junior school. And I said the lads wouldn't half take the Mickey out of me if I turned up at the station with my mother. So I said goodbye to her at home and there were floods of tears I know she was upset about it but she'll get over it.' I was to remember this conversation later in another context and at this time could not see what was wrong with your mother seeing you off especially as there would be lots of other mothers there today but that was up to Charlie. The tram arrived and we got on with all our kit as we clanked and rattled our way to town more and more lads from the battalion boarded and there were ribald shouts and many unflattering comments as there always are when men are together like this. It was all in good fun though and a lot of the civilian passengers were smiling and some were even joining in the banter. As we unloaded in town the civilians left on the tram gave us a cheer and shouted messages of good luck to us we waved to them as the tram started on its journey again. A sergeant from one of the other companies said right lads lets get into three ranks here, were in the British Army not Fred Karno's Army. And so we formed up into three ranks and marched down to the station singing, and people stopped on the street to cheer us as we passed by and little kids ran behind us and tried to dodge in between the ranks getting a boot up the backside for their trouble.

At the station we fell out and made our way to the number two platform where our train would be arriving, as we got onto the platform we could see just how crowded it was. We passed our fellow soldiers who were saying goodbye to wives, sweethearts, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers and for all I knew Uncle Tom Cobbley and all, and tried to find our mates. Charlie pointed and shouted. "There they are", and we caught sight of Bert and as we made our way forward all the rest who were on the platform. There was Mabel and Rosie Elijah Mack was there with his wife and kids, and the Lord Brothers with their mother. Then what really got my heart racing was I saw Helen standing with them, she looked pretty as a picture she had on a blue top coat with a blue scarf gloves and a matching tam o shanter on her head, her blonde hair was loose and cascaded onto her shoulder like gold. Bert by this time had seen us and told the rest who all started shouting and waving we made our way over to them and when we got there we said our hellos to everyone and the Lord Brothers introduced us to their mother who we had not met before. Mabel was hanging on to Bert's arm like it was a life preserver. Elijah was keeping his youngsters in check as they were exited about being on a railway station and seeing all the trains. And his wife was looking on smiling at him and his antics with the kids and the love in her eyes when she looked at Elijah was a joy to behold.

I had made my way over to Helen and Rosie as I got there Rosie said something to Helen and moved away coming past me she kissed my cheek on the way past and then was gone. I walked up to Helen and said. "God you don't know how good it is to see you here it makes all the difference you

know.” She replied. “Oh yes I know because it makes all the difference to me as well and I wouldn’t be anywhere else at this moment not for all the tea in china.” And with that her face crumpled up a bit and tears rolled down her cheeks, I took her in my arms and crooned in her ear. “Its fine my love everything will be just fine believe me.” I kissed her and she clung to me with a passion that was frightening but at the same time was right because it was the exact same passion as I felt. We held each other tight while Helen sobbed on my shoulder as though her tears would never stop, although I knew that when I had to leave her the sadness would be crippling for both of us. However at the moment just stood like this was my whole world everything I would ever want just me and Helen holding each other for eternity. But eternity is less than what you think and we were brought back to earth with a crash by the whistle sounding and the steam hissing and brakes screeching as the train came into the platform. We stepped back from each other and as we did I looked around and saw that Mabel and Bert and even much to my surprise Rosie and Charlie had been doing the same as me and Helen. The train transport officers were running up and down shouting and shoving men towards the train and we all knew that we didn’t have long left. Charlie had left Rosie and had commandeered a compartment for us he shouted. “Come on my lucky lads all aboard before some other lot gets here and steals our billet.” We piled all our kit into the compartment and then stepped back down onto the platform to say our final farewells like a lot of other chaps were doing, this was much to the distress of the transport officers who were trying to get the train away. But they had got a load of Military Police with them now and these were now physically chucking men onto the train and we knew it would not be long before they got to us. I took Helen in my arms again and kissed her tenderly she said. “You will be careful Billy Boy wont you because I could not bear to lose you now or ever.” The tears had stopped now and she was looking at me with desperation in her eyes. I replied. “You know me my love I will always come back and I will always be careful you can count on that”, and then I kissed her again. She whispered in my ear. “Take care my love and we must write as much as we can and I will let you know how I’m doing when I join the nursing auxiliary, and now you must go”, she kissed me one last time and then stood back. Rosie came and stood beside her I kissed her cheek and said. “Take care of yourself old Rosy look after Ma and Beth but look after Helen especially for me.” She replied. “I will Billy Boy and you take care don’t you be going daft and volunteering for anything stupid you know what you’re like.” I made my way towards the carriage and I said goodbye to Mrs Mack and Mrs Lord on the way past. I kissed Mabel on the cheek and said. “I am really glad for you and Bert I hope everything turns out the way you want it too.” She replied. “Thanks Billy Boy and don’t you worry it will do because me and Bert know exactly what we’re doing and we do love each other so”, and with that she then kissed me.

We were now hanging out of the carriage windows as was nearly everybody else that could on the train, the MPs were just chucking the last of the men on board and we would be off any minute. Our little group of women were taking to us as we lent out the windows. Elijah’s wife was holding the children one in each hand and telling them. “Look there’s daddy on the train wave to him darlings”, and they were looking at Elijah with big saucer eyes and their little hands were flapping like seagulls wings. Elijah was saying. “You two be good for your mother and look after her, look here Martha I will be home just as soon as we’ve sorted these Huns out alright?” Mrs Mack replied with an air of dignity. “That’s alright Elijah you do your duty and me and the boys will be here waiting for you when you come home.” I heard Mrs Lord say to her boys. “Be sure to tell Frank to be careful and tell him to write to me as often as he can, and all of you look after one another”, and then she started weeping again. Meanwhile Mabel was saying to Bert. “Don’t you let anything happen to you Albert Hall I love you and I couldn’t bear for anything to harm you, just come back to me please?” Rosie shouted to Charlie. “Keep your head down and don’t play the hero, oh and Charlie it’s been fun but I have someone else who I like be seeing you.” The train whistle blew and the train shunted and clanked as the engine took up the strain and started to move. I watched as Helen shouted to me. “God keep you Billy Boy and let him deliver you safe back to me and she blew me a kiss. The train was picking up speed now and pulling out of the station on the platform it was pandemonium as people shouted and waved, a band had struck up the National Anthem and the people on the platform were all singing now. As we pulled further away the lads leaned out as far as they could to catch a

glimpse of their loved one's, risking serious injury or even death if they caught their heads on one of the stanchions as they went by. And then we were picking up speed and passing through the outskirts of the town, everybody in our carriage was sat down now and lost in their own thoughts of home and of their loved ones. As the train thundered on people passed cigarettes round shared sandwiches with each other, bottles of beer and stories of their leaves. All this time we were getting further and further away from home and nearer and nearer towards the battalion. People tried to sleep I myself was wide awake thinking about Helen and how much I was missing her already I looked out the window at the countryside speeding by. Bert came and sat beside me he said. "Thanks for understanding about me and Mabel I really appreciate it. I just wanted to let you know and also to tell you how much she means to me." He looked at me and I could see the honesty of this statement shining in his eyes so I told him. "That's alright Bert she has told me herself what you mean to each other and I wish you both well." He replied. "That's fine because we are so in love I didn't think it would happen to me and if it did never as quick as it has done. Mind you I don't know what George Drew will say as he was pretty keen on her himself." He had a look of reservation about him as he said this, so I thought that I had better put his mind to rest. I replied. "Don't you worry about George Mabel told me that the only reason that she encouraged him at all was so that she could get near you? It was you she fancied all the time you must see that by the way things have gone between you two so George doesn't enter into matters."

Elijah lent across and remarked. "Bloody hell you young lads and your girlfriends I don't know what it's coming to. Why don't you be like me and get married then you don't have all these doubts and questions. I tell you the best thing I ever did was to get wed to my Martha and have the two nippers and I wouldn't swap them for all the kippers on the Isle of Man." He looked thoughtfully at Bert for a moment then said. "Listen Bert lad if you love the girl get her married in the end its what they all want it's what they dream about from being tiny until they finally get the ring on their finger." Bert replied. "I can understand what you're saying and it sounds to me as if you got this courting ritual off to a fine art, so you never had any of the troubles that we had?" Elijah looked at him and burst out laughing as he said. "Troubles course I had troubles are you off your rocker or something everybody has troubles that's what's fun about being in love. It's all about the indecision, and feeling high as a kite one moment and as low as your boot laces the next, but the best bit is knowing that you mean more to someone than anyone else in the world and they mean the same to you and that's a fact." He turned and shouted to Tommy Holden who was sat next to the window on the opposite side. "Pass us a beer Tommy I'm spitting feathers here", and a beer was duly passed along. He took a deep swig from it and then turned to us saying. "All right lads now you've had the gospel according to Elijah let's leave home behind now otherwise it just preys on your mind and makes you feel worse than you do already. Lets concentrate on returning to the battalion and finishing this here war off as quickly as we can then we can all return to our loved ones." And then he turned to Nobby Clark and said. "Come on Nobby knock that old mouth organ out and let's have a tune or two to see us on our way." So Nobby did and we had a right good sing song as we sped on our way back to Wetherington and the other compartments joined in. I thought about what Elijah had said and it made a lot of sense for if I kept thinking of Helen all the time I would surely send myself mad. The thing was to keep her in my heart and to keep the rest of the battalion and war stuff in my head, in any case we would write to each other a lot so I would always feel close to her. Yes that was the way to go alright otherwise I would not be able to get anything done, and as Elijah said we must get this war won so that the world would be safe for all the people of it and we could get back to the ones we loved.

Before we knew it the whistle was shrilling the wheels were squealing and we were slowing down as we pulled into Wetherington train station. We started disembarking and could hear the shouts of the officers and NCO's from our battalion as they told us. "All leave personnel form up in company order outside the station, place all kitbags on the transport provided no other equipment just kitbags is that clear. Any soldier placing any extra kit on the transport will be on fatigues until hell freezes over and that's a promise." We walked outside and shoved our kitbags on to a cart that

was stood at the entrance and then we formed up into companies. The orders were given and we started our march from the village back to camp there was quite a strong wind blowing and as we got out of the village and onto the moors the snow had blown across and was lying in drifts. We struggled through them and so did the transport, then some daft officer shouted. Right lads let's have a song to cheer us up and see us through this damn snow." Nobody seemed very interested and all most of us wanted to do was to get to the camp and get warm sod the singing. But then one of the sergeants said. "Come on sing you lazy blighters it will make you feel better and for them that don't there will be a kick up the arse". Tipperary started up further back in the ranks and pretty soon everyone had joined in and we bowled along the road now bellowing song after song. We approached the lights of the camp and swung in through the camp gates, we marched onto the square in front of battalion headquarters and here we were halted, the officers and NCO's took up their parade positions. CSM Greaves came to the front of the parade and stood to attention, I had to look again but I saw that he had been promoted to RSM and I was quite pleased. He said. "Right lads listen up the CO just wants a quick word and then you can get to your barracks and have a warm, then he bellowed Parade, Parade Attention!"

The CO had come out onto the veranda of the battalion headquarters followed by the adjutant and a couple more officers. He spoke to us saying. "I won't keep you long men I would like first to welcome you back and to say I hope that you enjoyed your Christmas leave. But that is behind you now and we must get on with the task in hand." He paused for a minute and then continued. "The advance party has already gone to prepare the way for our move down to Salisbury. But there is still a lot of work to be done here before we hand over to our sister battalion." He looked out over us all stood there and ranged his gaze over all our faces like he knew every single one of us. Then he said. "I know that you wont let me down as the job you did before you went on leave was excellent and a credit to you all. So lets have the same attitude and work load now and we will be ready for the move and handover in no time. I will dismiss you now and you can get off to your barracks and some warmth thank you, RSM dismiss the parade." And with this he turned and walked back into the battalion headquarters with his entourage following him. We were dismissed and went to sort out and pick up our kitbags, and then we went off to our huts looking for a bit of warmth. I must admit that the colonel certainly knew how to encourage and raise the spirits of the men. He knew just what to say and when to say it I suppose that is what made him such a good officer, which I thought he definitely was. He seemed to have a way of knowing who needed what in the battalion a way of seeming to know each man personally, and I knew that the men of the battalion would follow him anywhere to a man.

Entering our hut we found to our surprise that it was empty, but we didn't give it a thought simply thinking that the rest of the lads must still be out on fatigue parties. So we put our kit onto our beds and all gathered round the iron stove in the middle of the hut to warm up. The door opened and Dick Barnes came in he saw us and his face lit up as he said. "My god you don't know how glad I am to see you lot back off leave it was getting pretty lonely here by myself I can tell you. Bert asked him. "What do you mean by yourself?" Dick looked at him like he was daft and replied. "Like I said on my own, alone, no one here just me no one to talk to or have a drink with that kind of alone." Bert asked again. "Well where has everybody gone then are they off doing fatigues is that why you're alone lad?" Dick answered. "Oh sorry I quite forgot that you don't know what's happened so I'll tell you. I was laid up in bed with a sore leg and the lads were working as usual then they came back early and told me a parade had been called and they'd let me know what was happening later. He paused for a moment and looked round at us he continued saying. "Anyway they came back really exited and they all began to pack there stuff, so I asked them what was going on? They told me that the advance party at the other camp needed more men and that our hut was providing some of them." He lit a dock end up with a Lucifer and chuckled to himself. "So I asked what about me and they told me that no one had mentioned me, then the door opened and the Cpl told them to get outside on the parade ground. And I said to him what about me corp. and he told me to stay were I was and to report for duty at the company office, and I've been here alone ever since, come to think of it they

went just after you'd gone on leave." We all stared at him taking in what he had just told us and Charlie said. "Well that's that then the lads are gone and that means more room in the ablutions and in the cookhouse just like when they were on leave." Elijah turned to him saying. "Just shut up a minute Charlie". Then he asked Dick. "If our entire hut have gone how many of the others from the battalion have gone, do you know?" Dick answered. "Well I know that at least half of the ones who came back off the first leave have gone to help the advance party in Salisbury and that's a fact."

Elijah said. "Well lads no wonder we were met by the colonel when we got back, and no wonder he said there was still plenty of work to do. With that many of our lot down there and if its like Dick said they left just after we went on leave then there wont have been much of the work that we left completed if you know what I mean." We looked at each other thinking back to the amount of work we had to do before we went on leave and not relishing it one bit. Elijah continued saying. "Looking at it I can see there's nothing for it but for us to really pull all the stops out because we must finish this work off so the reserve battalion can take over here. Then we can get to our new camp and then on over to France and a crack at the enemy", we all nodded our heads in agreement. There didn't seem to be much else to say we knew that we had to buckle down and get on with the work after all there was a war on, and it wasn't like we were at the front fighting like a lot of other units were. So we all seemed to take in what Elijah had said and we drifted off to our beds were we stowed away our kit. Then unspoken every one of us went to bed early so we would be ready in the morning to get on with the work with a rested body and mind. We went to work with a will and were getting many of the jobs done that needed doing before we handed the camp over. A big talking point amongst us had been the reporting of a Christmas truce were our soldiers and the Germans had met In No Mans land on Christmas Day, it was reported that they exchanged cigarettes and food. It had also been stated that at least one football match had taken place before the opposing armies strolled back to their own lines. But we also heard that the Top Brass had a fit over this fraternization and had sent instructions to the front line that it must never happen again. They didn't want our lads getting friendly with the enemy as they thought that it would harm their aggressiveness in the attack. And besides which we were at war and there was no place in a war for this kind of behaviour or sentiment. This was one of our first insights into the General Staffs priorities, and to say that we were not particularly impressed is an understatement. Still on we worked and at last we could see we were coming nearer the end of the fatigues and work that we had been assigned to do. But I can tell you it had been hard work in fact back breaking work.

The New Year came and went and we had a drink and toasted in 1915 we also toasted that this would be the year that we won victory. But it was a pretty subdued time as we were confined to camp, the village was put out of bounds for the duration or until we passed through it on our way to the station when we transferred to the new camp. It didn't really matter anyway because on top of the fatigues and working parties we still had to keep up our military training as well. There was always Physical fitness drill along with weapon training, foot drill, and of course route marches. These were always hard and of course like in every walk of life you had your shirkers. They had a trick of getting out of route marched by shoving a piece of soap up their backside, this would cause them to get the runs and then they'd have to go to the MO so getting out of the march. We used to have different lengths of route marches, sometimes five miles or ten, or at times even twenty, you would march for an hour and then get a ten minute rest. I will tell you something you needed a rest as well, because it is not easy walking for an hour in full kit carrying a rifle as well. But no matter what the majority of us enjoyed the training, no matter how physical it got. As the end of January neared our task was complete and our sister battalion was due to take over from us in two days time. All the main departments such as stores offices cookhouse and such had already been taken over, and all that was left was the official hand over. This was to be done with the training battalion marching in, as we stood in formation, and then us marching out to catch the trains that had just deposited them. Now that everything was ready we couldn't wait to be on our way to our new camp, for it put us that step closer to the fighting in France, and we had already been informed that we would not be spending long in our new transit camp. So there was every chance that the powers that be would be issuing

orders for our move into combat. Two days later we were drawn up on the square watching our sister battalion march in, the band was playing and both Colonels were stood out in front watching. And although we had formed a great respect for Colonel Terry we still had tremendous affection for Colonel Jack Harmon and he for us. The reserve battalion finally got onto the square and were formed up looking at them I think we all felt sorry for them. Because after all we were the active battalion the first battalion to be formed from the town and as such we would be given the honour of joining the fighting first or so we hoped.

But on this wet cold day all we could think about was boarding the trains at the station were we could finally have a smoke and take the weight off our feet. The speeches went on and on and to tell you the truth I can't remember what was said, only right at the very end when Colonel Jack spoke. He reminded us how not very long ago we had all volunteered to form the town's first battalion, how that through perseverance and hard work we had got to the stage of being a very fine battalion. That now we had a sister battalion that would be striving to achieve the same standard as what we had set and to follow us into the field. He wished us all the very best and told us always to do our utmost, that the eyes of the town were upon us and they were so proud of our battalion as indeed they were of our sister battalion. He told us to do our duty follow orders and fight like terriers, that we would not go wrong following this advice, and always to remember how much regard and affection he had for us. We gave him a huge cheer and then we marched past both the COs as they took the salute past the reserve battalion who cheered us on our way while the band played on. And we marched out the gate and down the track to Wehterinton village and on to the trains. As we marched down towards the station we could see that near the whole village had turned out to see us off, They were shouting and singing some of the children were waving small Union Jack flags, bottles of beer were thrust into our hands as well as cigarettes and food. And I must say we really appreciated the trouble the village had took, because we knew that they could ill afford to spend money on themselves let alone us.

We fell out and the villagers crowded round shaking hands and patting us on the back, some of the village girls were kissing some of our blokes it was a real free for all, but the RSM soon put a stop to what was going on, and before we knew it we were loaded onto the trains and ready for the off. The villagers lined the platform and any other vantage point they could reach and as the trains pulled out they were singing and waving. And may I say there were quite a few tears and not just from the villagers, because like I have said they really saw us as not only being Blackthorns battalion but theirs as well. Soon we had left Wetherington far behind as we hurtled along but as we got further into the Midlands that's when the delays started. Sometimes we were shunted onto spurs or sidings to allow ammunition trains to go past and sometimes for other trains that had higher priority than ours. So the hours rolled by and it was dark now, the singing and euphoria had finished long ago and people now were trying to sleep. At last we pulled in to Colchester station and were emptying out onto the platform and forming up when a very harassed looking Brigadier came up with a load of officers in tow. He spoke to Colonel Terry and whatever he said certainly caused a major upheaval. An officers conference was quickly called and after a few minutes the officers returned and called all the senior NCO's over. Meanwhile we were stood around like last weeks left overs, we had no idea what was going on and were getting a bit pissed off. After all we had been travelling on these trains for hours and we were tired and irritable. The officers and NCO's gathered in front of their respective companies and platoons, and then the colonel came and stood in front of everyone with the adjutant. He said: 'Alright lads there have been a change in our orders, what I want you to do now is embark back on the trains, and we will let you know as soon as possible what's happening. He walked away to talk to the brigadier again, while we were fell out and loaded back onto the trains but not may I say without a lot of grumbling. The trains pulled out and we thundered through the night, there were all kinds of roomers going about we were off to France, we were going on a special training course although nobody specified why. And my personal favourite, that the advance party had buggered everything up and had done a bunk to a brothel in Ipswich, and we were being sent to round them up.

On and on the train thundered we slept in fits and starts and the carriage was blanketed in thick tobacco smoke. It wasn't like before nothing held us up but there was no stopping, which had its complications as this was not a corridor train. So if you were bursting for a piss it was out of the window and watch for the wind. If it was for the other business then your ass was lowered out of the window while two of your mates held onto your arms and suspended you out of the window until you were finished. As you may gather this was an extremely risky business not only could they let go and you would fall to your death, but a train coming the other way may hit you and carry you off into the night. So all I can say is I'm glad I didn't need to go, and even more relieved that we didn't have a case of the trots going round or it could have been very messy.

I must have dropped off to sleep because when I opened my eyes we had stopped and I could hear seagulls squawking like banshees. As I lit a smoke Charlie let up the window blind, when we looked out we could see across the way the black hull of a ship. Other carriages must have been doing the same as just like in ours excited chatter broke out as we realised that we were being sent over to France. Charlie shouted out. "That's it they can't do without the Blackthorns, they've needed to send for us to finish the job off lads." While he was saying this there was a lot of bustle outside and as we hung out the window looking up and down the docks which were huge and packed with ships. The MPs came along banging on the carriage doors with their truncheons and shouting. "Get your kit and get out, form yourself up into your units and wait for further orders." We formed up and waited while our officers and NCOs ran about like headless chickens, as we were waiting I took the time to study the ship in front of us, I must admit that I didn't know much about naval vessels. Though I must admit this one looked big enough to me and my gaze roamed up to the deck and took in all the troops who were leaning on the rails looking down on us. And then out the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of something moving so I naturally turned my head to see more clearly. As I did so you could have knocked me down with a feather, there at the rail waving and shouting were Frank Lord and George Drew. I spoke out the side of my mouth to Elijah and Charlie who were stood in rank next to me. "Look who's up there its Frank and George the advance parties already on board, which means?" Charlie butted in saying. "Which means were going on board, I knew it this is it France here we come!" I continued saying. "There can be no doubt now that the battalions off to the fighting and I must say that it's about time too we've been hanging around doing nothing but training and fatigues." Other people in the ranks had seen their own friends on the deck of the ship and a buzz was beginning to rise up from amongst us. We were told to shut up and wait quietly for our orders, and to face forward and stop gazing around like a load of cows standing in a field. We pulled our eyes away with great difficulty, but as we did so we could see that the blokes crowding the rails were being moved away from them leaving an empty deck on our side. Fortunately for us we were not kept waiting much longer and were marched along the dock to the gang plank to embark on board the ship. Elijah turned to a MP Sergeant stood by the gang plank and asked. "Eh up sergeant what about the rest of our kit then when do we get that?" The MP looked at him with a nasty grin on his face saying. "Never mind about your kit get on board and look sharp, don't worry your kit will catch you up when you get where you're going." Elijah then asked. "And where would we be going then sergeant we promise not to tell anyone else if you let us know?" The MP shot a look of fury at Elijah and was just making a move towards him with his truncheon drawn when we started climbing the gang plank.

As we were stood waiting to move further I glanced at the front of the ship where I could see the name SS Mongolia written there. Well I can tell you that I was none the wiser for this information, but I thought to myself that it would be something I could put into my next letter to Helen. We continued to push on up the gang plank until we reached the top and set foot on the deck, which I must admit I was glad to do as it was a long way up and the gang plank didn't feel to safe with all those men stood on it. We were chivvied along by our own people and by the navy as well a sailor took us down below decks to show us where we would be sleeping. We turned in through an iron door and got the shock of our lives in front of us was a huge space with bunk beds covering the majority of it. The sailor told us it was a converted cargo hold and that we might as well find a place

to kip as there were more troops expected on board. So Elijah, Charlie, the Lord Brothers Nobby Clark and me all got beds together, Charlie as usual was the first to say something. "Well I must say its going to be a bit crowded in here, and it might get a touch smelly as well." Elijah replied. "Don't worry Charlie it's not so far across to France, we probably won't be down here that long and we can put up with your smell until then." Charlie looked at him with a sickly grin but there was nothing else for it so we threw our kit on our beds and started sorting through things. It was alright our going to war and being on this ship but like Elijah had said what had happened to the rest of our kit? We had only been travelling on the train with our webbing rifles and small packs everything else had been packed into freight compartments at the back. I had no doubt that our kit had been loaded on board, but that was no good to us here and in our kit was a few luxury items that would have been very welcome here and now. More troops were coming in to our hold and a speaker system was informing us that we would be told about eating arrangements as well as the ablution arrangements and everything else we would need to know while we were aboard in an hour's time. I must say for once I agreed with Charlie it was getting rather crowded down here and the smell of so many bodies and of the khaki uniforms drying out with body heat down here was getting a bit much. I was just thinking this when up walked George and Frank I don't know how they had found us but they were a sight for sore eyes. After all the greetings were over they recounted all that had happened to them since we had last seen them. When they were finished they said. "Come on let's go up on deck and out of this football crowd what we need is some fresh air." But before we did there were two bunks still free next to us and so they went and got their kit from where they were staying and joined us.

They made to go up on deck but I hung back and George said. "What's the matter Billy Boy?" I looked round at the rest of the lads and replied. "Hadn't we better wait here for the instructions that there going to issue shortly?" George laughed and patted me on the back saying. "That's alright Billy Boy there are speakers all over the ship even up on the deck so we won't miss any instructions or anything else." I looked at him and smiled as I replied. "That's alright then let's get going I can't wait to be up on deck and get some fresh air. We were all stood on the deck as the ship cast off and the Dockers and other people on the dockside waved at us, the rails were packed with lads trying to catch a last glimpse of home. There was a light drizzle falling as we nosed out of the docks and got under way a huge cheer came from our decks as we said farewell to England. We watched the land on either side of us slip past, and I am sure I was not the only one with a lump in his throat at this sight. Charlie who was stood beside us said. "Where the bloody hell are we anyway, I still haven't got a clue?" A sailor stood at the rail looking back down the ship turned towards us and replied. "You've just left Southampton docks, and were now moving out to join up with the other ships of this group in Southampton Water, which could take a bit of time." The loudspeaker started up again and Elijah said. "Well that's not so bad Southampton I could spit across to France from here. I told you we wouldn't be cooped up long on this floating sardine can; it won't take us long at all to get there." We all stared at the land again no doubt wondering when we would be back again and if when we came back we would be whole in mind as well as body. The sailor who had told us this moved to go past us and gave us a most pitying look; Frank saw this and said to him. "What's wrong is there something up with what we just talked about?" The sailor looked at us all again before replying. "No not really like your mate said you can nearly spit to France from here which is fine and not far wrong." We all glanced at one another and smiled, this sailor probably took us as country bumpkins or something because of our accents. But then he went on to say. "Yes you could surely spit to France from here its only a few miles away, the only trouble is that you're not going to France!" George asked. "What do you mean we're not going to France?" The sailor looked at George like he was from the moon or somewhere before he answered. "What I say this lots not going to France or anywhere near it." He stopped and started laughing before continuing. "Oh no my bonny lads your going quite far away from France you see lads we are bound for the land of pyramids and dancing girls the land of the Pharaohs." So this was it we were going to EGYPT!!!

PART 2

Egypt and Gallipoli

Feb 1915 August 1915

Chapter Six

The sun came up not as it does in Britain where you have to wait through the greyness of dawn before it pops its head out to greet you. Out here there is hardly any time between the velvet blackness of night, and then the searing light of the sun as it rises to bathe the land in its life giving light. No wonder the Ancient Egyptians worshipped it as a god. After our small flotilla had joined together in Southampton Water we set sail for Egypt I must admit that finding out we were not going to France had fair took the wind out of our sails. However you learn fast in the army that you do as you're told and get on with it. Our first few days on board were dominated with learning about life on a small ship for the amount of men we had on board. There were messing arrangements to be made and to accommodate all the troops we ate in rotated shifts. The same happened with ablution arrangements washing and the like.

We sailed on down the Atlantic and at first everything was strange and took a bit of getting used to but there was little sea sickness and the ocean remained calm, the sun poked its head out a few times and this cheered people up no end. The lads were getting on with their allotted fatigues and we were put on sanitary squad for the first time. I can tell you I just wished that things had stayed so calm and peaceful but as I later found out from a naval officer. The storm that lashed us for two days had come out of the Bay of Biscay and caught us, because although we were out in the Atlantic we were opposite the Bays position. Well there were some green faces and no mistake I think most of us were sick and even the navy boys said it was a bad storm. It really was chaos and the sanitary and cleaning squads were working overtime and to make matters worse were sick as well. The trouble was with all the men on board it was hard to get to a rail to heave up over so below decks and the decks themselves were covered in the contents of peoples stomachs. And like I say because nearly everyone was sick you still have to do your fatigues and duties so that made it worse, I am sure you can imagine that cleaning up other peoples vomit when you are sick yourself is a non starter. And the moaning and groaning that went on we must have sounded like a boat full of the damned. I will admit for myself this was one of the worst situations that I had ever been in, after all the nearest I had been to sailing was on Queens Park boating lake, and I should imagine that most of the others were the same. But after two days the storm had blown itself out or had carried on further out into the Atlantic, so the weather and sea got back if not to the calm that they had been at least to a bearable state. This allowed us to get all the mess that was still about cleaned up, and in doing this it made things quite a bit more pleasant for us. Although the smell in the hold was pretty foul by now and the Captain ordered the hatch covers removed so as to allow fresh air down and to dissipate at least some of the smell.

On we sailed through the Straights of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean Sea, the blue of the sea really is quite breath taking, some of the older men the NCOs and the like who had been regular army were taking about postings in Gibraltar and Malta. Some of the things they were saying made me blush but on the whole they made them sound like exotic places to visit. I just thought it was a pity that we were stuck on board instead of off seeing these places. The weather however was excellent and you could smell a difference in the air that is hard to describe maybe it was the dryness in the air. Being in these warm climates allowed us also to get our first proper showers of the voyage; this was done by marching as many naked soldiers as possible on deck and then spraying them down with the fire hoses. This I must admit was lovely if at times bruising especially if the sailors got the pressure wrong, however because they used sea water the only constriction was the amount of people following you. If you were in the last batch you could stay and have a lovely cool down and not need to bother about who was following you, as everything was done in strict rotation though the hose downs happened rarely. And as the time went on the earlier enchantment of the voyage wore off, being cooped up on a ship is not the best experience in the world especially with so many other people. Not only this at night no lights could be shown and you always had to have your life preserver with you. This was because in the event that we were attacked and had to abandon ship the lifeboats on board would be lucky if they could accommodate the crew. This was a cheerful situation that was never that far from our minds, and although there had been boat drills at first there were

hardly any now. Because I think they now saw that in the event of an attack and sinking, that not many of us would survive. When we were not doing fatigues or duties we passed the time by writing home, or by playing cards, crown & anchor, catching the sun if we could. And our favourite pastime of speculating what we were going to be doing in Egypt and this took up a great deal of our time. And believe you me there were some really unbelievable scenarios brought up, and some that were so far fetched as to be derided before they were out of the person's mouth properly.

Then one day there was a sudden excitement in the crew we talked to a couple of them and asked what was going on? They told us that we were only a days steaming from Malta and that we would be stopping off there to replenish the coal for the boilers. When they saw our faces were not split into huge grins like theirs they moved off muttering about 'idiots who knew nothing, and had never been anywhere' this surprised and irked us. We sighted Malta the next day and the excitement from all of our boys was contagious you would think that we had never seen land for years. But although this was not the case you want to try being on a ship for any length of time and then watch your own reaction on seeing land. All I knew was that it was a break from the boredom of life on board and that had to be a good thing. We were piloted into Valletta Harbour and the rocks and the huge buildings dotted about on them were breathtaking also some of the small houses we had seen on the way in all painted white shone in the morning sun. Small boats came alongside us and the young native boys were doing all kinds of diving and other tricks in the sea to impress us. The loading of the ship started and a lot of our officers were allowed to go ashore for a few hours but not us. Oh no we had to help load the other supplies on board, and when we had finished doing this we were told that there was no more time left for us to have a look ashore as we were sailing that night. So the most we saw of Malta was a bit of coast line and Valletta Harbour, unlike our bloody officers still that had always been Tommy Atkins luck. On we sailed through the Mediterranean rumours abound about enemy ships being around although the sailors laugh at this. We held a concert party last night and everyone seemed to enjoy themselves, although some of the songs reminded us a bit too much of home. Afterwards I wrote to Helen and told her how much I was missing her and that I could not wait to get home again. I think that maybe homesickness is beginning to get to me but I will not give in to it, the nights are worse when you have time to think! A sailor told me that we have only three more days to sail before we reach Alexandria, which is the port we are heading to in Egypt. I tell the news to the rest of the lads and we are overjoyed that we are nearly at the end of the journey and that we will soon find out what we have come here for. So tonight we go to sleep happy in the knowledge that we will soon be on dry land again, I just hope that the tar was not shooting me a line and that we are close to our final destination. The next day news comes through of enemy submarine activity and we are put on alert we have to wear our life preservers and the boats are made ready. Again the sailors deride us and laugh at these reports they tell us not to worry that it will be the same as the last scare. The next day proves them wrong and now their faces are creased with worry, and they are not laughing now. One of the ships had fallen behind with engine trouble the SS China Sea and an enemy submarine must have spotted her. The submarine attacked and the China Sea was sunk, there was no information about survivors. And the only reason we found out is that she was a supply boat and was carrying our mail that had been picked up in England when we sailed. As if this was not bad enough it had picked up another lot in Malta that had come by faster ship than ours and had been dropped off there for us to pick up.

So now we are about to sail into Alexandria minus our mail but luckily still in possession of our lives and about to swap the SS Mongolia for dry land. Major Danby who had come to the battalion with Colonel Terry came up to the rail and started to tell us about Alexandria as we sailed in to harbour. As we proceeded we saw an Island with a ruined fort on it and a large breakwater leading off it this we were informed was the Island of Pharos where the famous wonder of the ancient world the lighthouse or Pharos of Alexandria stood. And the breakwater or mole was built to create not only a way to reach the lighthouse but also as a docking facility for ships and judging by the ones we could see there it was still used to this day. Major Danby also told us that the city had been built by Alexander the Great and named after him, and that at one time it was the envy of the

ancient world. He went on and informed us that it had the largest library in the known world and that every civilised country sent and received scrolls from it. They had a form of university where scholars from all over the ancient world came to learn, also a museum and a zoo as well. In fact the centre of ancient Alexandria was given over entirely to academia and religion. George looked out and said. "So what happened to it sir it doesn't look to bright right now?" The Major knocked his pipe out on the rail as he replied. "The usual things war, plague, earthquakes that sort of thing, but believe you me in ancient times this was the city that the rest of the world looked to." Well Charlie said. "I hope we are not docking on that mole as it looks pretty crowded to me and I don't fancy having to march all the way along it past the crowds milling about over there." We looked over towards the mole and there where ships moored there unloading, and crowds of people either unloading the ships or selling their wares or generally just hanging around. I must admit that I was with Charlie in not fancying having to march through all that humanity, but I was also fascinated with this place as I had never seen anything like it in my life.

The whole place seemed to be in a frenzy there were ships everywhere from liners and warships to Arab dhows and small feluccas rowing like mad to get out of the way of the bigger ships. A lot of these little boats were in danger of getting sunk with other ships as they flitted around the big ships waiting just outside the harbour to enter, they were like flies round an old bull elephant. And the noise was everywhere a cacophony of sounds all mixed together so that it was hard to pick out individual sounds and at times hard to hear. As our ship slowed down and came to a halt we dropped anchor and waited in line for our turn to be piloted in to the berth where we would unload and disembark. Major Danby had come on deck and pointed with his pipe stem saying. "We won't be docking at the mole we will be going into the west harbour that is the second of Alexandria's harbours. It is also the main one and is where the customs house and the vast majority of the warehouses are situated, the mole which Drew points out is crowded is the eastern harbour and is mostly used for unloading dhows and fishing boats and the like." Elijah Mack piped up in an amazed voice. "Bloody hell sir how do you know so much about this place?" I said. "I suppose it's the schooling you've had that does it isn't that right sir?" The Major replied. "No not really I spent a bit of time in Egypt and in Cairo when my Regiment was stationed here in 09 I got about quite a bit. And the place has always held a fascination for me so I have learned as much as I can about her past and a fair bit about her present." His eyes looked far away as he said. "Still I can't stand here chatting to you lot all day there will be a lot to prepare before we disembark, just keep an eye out for peddlers and beggars keep your money firmly in your pockets." Then having told us this he walked off towards officer's country under the bridge of the ship. Well Charlie was saying. "You learn something new every day, not that I'm bothered about some old Egyptian history as long as there's drink and women to be had I will be content." Elijah retorted. "You're a clown Charlie Slater what would you know about women and which one would have you? None from what I've seen." A flush spread across Charlie's face but he kept quite, for he knew when Elijah made a statement like this he meant it, and any kind of flippant reply would earn you a bunch of fives. Frank Lord shouted to us. "Look at this hell fire I've never seen anything like it", we looked out to where he was pointing and our mouths dropped open in amazement. Like an army of ants little boats and feluccas where coming towards us from all directions. We couldn't quite believe where they where all coming from and as they got closer we could see that they were either packed with people or with goods. The closer they got the more we could make out there where boats with fruit, and fish packed on board with the Arabs holding out there wares to us and shouting up to the deck. Other boats had bolts of cloth which they flung over the decks in a rainbow of colour, and all the time the noise was getting louder and louder so that you could not hear what the individual merchants where flogging. And so close where they now to the ship and so crowded was it below that there was a real danger of a boat being rammed and capsized or of someone getting seriously hurt.

Sergeant Stanley Dawson came up to our bit of rail and we made room for him but only just as the rails where crowded with Tommy's watching this spectacle unfold and shouting their own ribald comments down at the boats. And this just added another aspect to this floating market that

was now surrounding the whole ship. The sellers couldn't understand what our lads were saying and thought that they were haggling for their wares. They were gesticulating for us to throw ropes down to them so that they could tie their wares to them and we could haul them up for our inspection. Some of the lads did this and kept what was in the baskets without paying jeering from their towering safety down at the poor merchant below who was jumping up and down and pulling his hair out in frustration. All of a sudden there was a commotion and a large boat made its way through the other smaller boats got out of its way and it stopped under where we were stood. Most of the top deck was canopied and screened off, all of a sudden an Arab dressed in what looked like one of my mother's nightgowns appeared. He was a small greasy looking individual with his black hair shining like it was smothered in oil, but other than this it was difficult to make out his features properly until he looked up towards the deck.

I was taken aback as I looked down on a face that had been terribly burned down one side, it was ravaged and I turned my head away for a second. When I looked back down he had moved to a corner of the screen and I noticed that others had placed themselves at the remaining corners. Then a large fat man appeared he was dressed in a European suit of clothes and was mopping his face with a large hanky. A large Negro had moved up onto the prow he had in his hand what I can only describe as a large animal horn. As he stood straight and tall on the prow he placed the horn to his lips and blew into it, a very loud mournful wail spread out like an old army blanket across the water. After doing this for two or three times he lowered the horn and turned towards the fat man who inclined his head towards the Negro. It was hard for us to take in but from the parrot house noise that had been going on before there was now a heavy silence, every person in the rest of the boats had fallen silent. The fat man launched himself into speech he shouted up to us. "Gentlemen, I have for your delight a sample of my wares which I am sure you will find to your liking. It has been my pleasure to serve many of your armed men and to provide them with what they wish at the end of a long sea journey. My name gentlemen is Stelios Theopolis and I hope you will remember my name and use it when you come ashore to sample my wares, and now without more time wasting we shall get down to business. He shouted something to the men on the corners of the screen, and the screen dropped down next the canopy was drawn back so that we could now see straight down onto the deck. There was one big intake of breath from the whole of our side of the ship, and then there was cheering and whistling and general shouting and laughter. For there on the deck of this large barge displayed sat on silks and furs and posed in provocative ways, were about thirty women dressed like something out of the Arabian Nights. Now the other merchants and peddlers were watching even though they must have seen it many times before. I looked down at the women to judge their reaction to all this but they never moved from the poses they were holding for like the rest it was old hat to them. Stelios judged his time and carried on with his narrative. "Each one is a pearl believe you me sirs, each one is hand picked by myself for her talents, and although modesty forbids me I must still say talents not generally known outside the Sultans Harem. A large grin spread across his greasy face as he shouted. "Look here gentlemen look at Ophelia", and he raised a woman up from her pose and led her up and down the deck where she paraded herself. She was small and had dark hair she wore a sheer veil over her face and she was clad in sheer clothing through which you could see her skin. In fact I didn't know which way to look because you could see her legs all the way up through the veiled pants she had on.

It seemed like Charlie never learned and he was like a kid in a sweet shop shouting. "Take a look at her boy that's for me I can tell you." There was a huge laugh and Sergeant Dawson looked at him with contempt before saying. "That's for you, ha you couldn't afford one of her toenails if you paid everything you had saved up you idiot." Charlie looked crestfallen as he moaned. "What do you mean by that I've got a bit put away?" The Sergeant looked at him with sympathy in his eyes as he said. "Listen to me I know old Stelios I met him when I was here serving alongside Major Danby and let me tell you the prices he charges make it officers only and even some of them won't be able to afford it. So like I say forget about it, or if you like you could always ask Major Danby he got Stelios out of some kind of trouble with the Egyptian authorities last time we were here. So he owes him a

huge favour, but beware old Danby doesn't take to kindly to talking about Stelios so if I were you I'd keep away from him. George chipped in saying. "Still there's no harm in looking is there I mean if it's like you say we might as well get an eyeful free?" Dawson looked at George and said. "Look as much as you want but there's no point in anything else because I know we were not staying here in Alexandria we are moving on." Frank Lord butted in and asked. "Where are we moving to then do have you any idea?" "No not really I just know that we aren't stopping here, because we aren't needed here." We went back to watching what was going on beneath us and things seemed to be going alright for Stelios although he didn't know that we wouldn't be stopping in Alexandria. More women were shown and then it happened, he had shown off the last of his little harem and they now disappeared below decks on the dhow. All of a sudden there was a commotion behind us and further down the deck and then some of the ships crew pushed through to the railing, with them they were carrying one of the ships fire hoses with them. And on reaching the rail they pointed it down at Stelioses dhow and the rest of the fleet of small boats below us, the water was turned on and pandemonium ensued. There were more hoses up and down the rail and the crew played them over the boats and the people in them with great enthusiasm. And I must admit that as a spectator it was hilarious, there were merchants, boys, men women and assorted goods knocked into the water and almost drowned. There were boats frantically trying to get away and colliding with each other capsizing some and damaging others. Some were being filled with water and were in danger of being swamped, and the shouting and howling that was going on only made it funnier to us safe up on the ship's deck. Stelios had been pinned in a corner on his dhows deck and nearly drowned, but he had managed to get below decks and so saved himself. Some of his other employees hadn't been so lucky the chap with the badly burned face and a couple of the others who had helped with the canopy and screens, had been hosed over the dhows side and were now swimming around waiting to get back on board, which they eventually did during a lull. And with that the dhow set sail and got out of the way but not before the hoses had done a fair bit of damage. The canopy screens and the diaphragm that held them all together had been washed overboard by the hoses and now floated in the water with the rest of the flotsam. As the dhow got further away Stelios came to the stern rail and shook his fist at the ship and I suppose the crew. And that at this time was the last we saw of Stelios, I could not help feeling a bit sorry for him and the rest of the merchants and whatnots, after all they had given us the best laugh of the journey so far.

A pilot came on board to guide us into the port and orders were now being shouted out over the ships loud speakers telling us to get below and get our kit ready for disembarking. The ships anchor was being weighed and it seemed that we would be sailing on into the western harbour imminently. So with a last look towards the survivors of the small boat fleet who were now rowing slowly for the mole, we made our way below decks to pack our kit. eastern harbour and as we sailed in we could see the native quarter of Alexandria situated on a peninsula on and about the mole immediately south of the eastern harbour. As we pulled in to the western harbour we could see the customs house and a stretch of warehouses. There was frantic activity on the docks as cargos were unloaded from the many ships berthed there and I had never seen a place as busy in my life. Our ship had berthed and its lines were now secured to the dockside, already as we waited on deck to disembark our kit and the rest of the cargo from the forward holds were being unloaded. The sun beat down and it really was quite hot especially as we were in our service uniforms which were mainly made of wool, and not made for hot climates. We watched whilst we waited and saw that as soon as a ship was unloaded, it was quickly reloaded ready to set sail with its cargo to which ever port it was ordered to sail to. We could see lots of the cargo as it was hoisted on board there was sugar, and bales of cotton and wool also grain, and as the loads touched the deck army's of workers would swarm over it like ants and stow the cargo away in the holds. The gang planks were put up onto our ship and we started to file down them looking forward to planting our feet on dry ground. As we got to the bottom of the gang plank we were shepherded over to a huge empty warehouse where we were then paraded in battalion formation. But as no one seemed to know what was going on the order came to stand at ease, and then we were given permission to have a smoke. George Drew said: 'bloody hell lads it's been a good show so far, I don't think we've had a show like we've had so far back in Blackthorn.

A clutch of beautiful girls to ogle at and then the comedy of nearly seeing a fat oily Greek ratter drowned and his dhow badly damaged. If this is the way things are going to be in Egypt then lead on.

We were all smiling at the memory of Stelios pinned tin a corner on the dhows deck whilst the hoses converged on him and nearly drowned him. ‘Did you see yon man with the burnt face and his mates get swept overboard I thought I was going to wet myself I laughed so much.’ Elijah told us choking on laughter again at the thought of it. Frank was looking over to where the warehouse door was wide open, ‘who the hell are these lot’, he said gesturing at a bunch of people who had just scuttled in through the door. “Here Sergeant there’s a load of blokes here dressed in their night shirts, what do you think there after?” Charlie bleated looking decidedly worried as Sergeant Dawson answered. “For your information they is not night shirts they are wearing Slater, but kaftans and it’s what most of the locals wear in this country. As for what their after why it’s your money they want, these gypso’s can smell a white man coming from half a mile away. So keep your hand on your money and don’t be buying any of the rubbish that their selling, watch for them crowding you if they get close because this lot would rob a blind man and piss in his eye sockets. The Sergeant seemed to be right in what he was saying as these human locusts pleaded and grabbed at our uniforms in an effort to get money out of us. Others held things up for our inspection baskets with fruit in them bead necklaces and other knick knacks, and all the time they were jabbering on in an unintelligible language that we could not understand. All of a sudden a roar erupted over the warehouse stunning the locals into immediate silence, Regimental Sergeant Major Greaves had just arrived with a couple of Regimental police and half a dozen Egyptian policemen. The latter being dressed in khaki shirt and shorts with sandals on their feet and bright red fezzes on their heads, in their hands they carried long thin canes which they swished backward and forwards in anticipation as the RSM said. “Get these thieves and vagabonds out of here this is the British Army not a fucking circus, next thing you know they will be joining the parade and want paying for it.” He shoved at the Egyptian policemen shooing them along well of course this lot didn’t need any second bidding and set to with a will. They piled in whipping the beggars and sellers with their thin canes, it wasn’t much of a contest really and the entourage that only minutes before had been trying to separate us from our money, now retreated in confusion. And a clean pair of heels and a lot of screaming and shouting was the last we saw of them as they where chased out of the empty warehouse with some enthusiasm by the Egyptian police.

The RSM said. “Right form up you lot get in rank do you think you’ve come to Egypt for a sightseeing tour or to buy a few souvenirs? Well I can tell you that you haven’t you’ve been sent by His Majesty the King and by the powers that be to do battle with the horrible Turks, and don’t you forget it.” He glared at us as we fell in then proceeded to walk up and down the ranks hectoring and badgering us. He continued: ‘Listen up the Colonel will be here shortly with the other officers and he will be relaying the orders he has received onto us. The first thing we will have to do however is get to the railway station to catch the trains that will take us onto where we are going.’ He looked over our ranks once again to make sure that we were all listening to him. “We will be marching to the station and when we do I want to see you marching like proper soldiers and not like the rabble that you usually resemble. Remember that we are representing our King Country and the Powers that be, so I want to see you at your best.” He turned to Staff Sergeant Domby and said. “What do you say Staff, we don’t want the gippos and the rest of the foreigners who will be watching us getting the wrong idea about the Battalion. We have to show them what the British Empire is built on and that’s us, isn’t that right?” The S/Sgt replied “That’s right sir we can’t have the gippos and the dagos mistaking us for some other countries army because of sloppy soldiering. The next thing you know they would all be thinking they were as good as us and there’s no way we could allow that.” The RSM smiled at this saying. “I hope you were listening to what we said and that it has penetrated those thick skulls of yours, because I don’t want you lot letting the King, Country, Colonel, Town and especially me down. So when we march to the station through this here heathen city lets do it with lots of swagger and show them the kind of men who won an Empire. They should be used to that seeing as how this place is named after another bugger who won an Empire.” The RSM was just

about to impart some more of his wisdom on us when there was movement over by the open doors of the warehouse. Colonel Terry and the rest of the Battalion officers entered and came over and stood in front of us. The Colonel spoke. "Right lads stand easy and I will fill you in on what's going to happen or at least on as much as we have been told." I just wished he'd get on with it as it was stifling in the empty warehouse and I am not sure what it was used to store but whatever it was it was a very pungent smell. It was hard to place at first it hadn't been too bad but now it was really starting to get up my nose. I looked out the corner of my eyes and saw that Frank on one side of me and Elijah on the other seemed to be suffering the same as I was. And to make matters worse the sweat was rolling down my face and dripping off my nose and chin it was also running down my back like a river in flood.

"I won't keep you long I know it's a bit warm in here so the sooner I can fill you in the sooner we can get going. The first thing I can tell you is that we won't be stationed here in Alexandria so if anyone and that includes officers thought they were going to see some more of Stelio's ladies then I am sorry to disappoint them." This brought a few laughs and even groans from the assembled troops, but after what the RSM had said it came as no surprise to us. He carried on saying. "We will be moving off shortly down to the train station to embark on the rolling stock allocated to us and from there we shall proceed to Cairo. We will be in Cairo for acclimatization for a few weeks, and also for advance training in desert and practical warfare." He stopped took off his hat and mopped his brow with his handkerchief. "I will now tell you a bit of the problem that our forces are facing here in Egypt and the surrounding countries. The Turks with a lot of encouragement from the Germans launched an attack on the Suez Canal with the objective of shutting it and causing massive problems to our supplies and naval activity" he cleared his throat and took up the narrative once again while we looked on and shuffled our feet in boredom which earned us a rebuke from the RSM. Even the Colonel was a bit tetchy as he said. "Alright settle down this is important, now to attack the canal the Turks had to travel something like 225-250 miles from their base which is situated in Syria. This will give you some idea of their determination as not only did they travel a great distance in abhorrent conditions they also crossed one of the most inhospitable deserts in the world to do it. The Colonel paused whilst he let these facts sink in unfortunately for most of us it was outside our comprehension or experience. Because the furthest the majority of us had ever been was a day trip to Blackpool and the only sand we had crossed was the beach. He now continued the Turk's and their German allies attacked the canal whilst we were still at sea on the 2nd of February there was little element of surprise from their raid as the staff had already had intelligence pointing out their objectives. Because of this our troops who fought them for two days gave them a bloody nose and sent them packing with more than 2,000 dead and many casualties", a cheer went up from our ranks but this was quickly silenced by the RSM.

The Colonel then said to us. "So you can see why we are needed here and why it is urgent that we are deployed as soon as possible because the Turks and their German masters know just how important the canal is to our country so they will attack it again there is no doubt about that. He looked over us all standing there and continued saying. "We must be ready to act as soon as we are acclimatised I know that Egypt is not where you want to be and that you'd rather be in France well so would I. But as I have said this strip of water is vital to the war effort so let's not have any griping or moaning about guarding the canal let us get on and do the best job we can and make the people back home proud of us." He then turned to the Officers behind him and said. "Right gentlemen get to your posts and make sure everything moves smoothly Company Commanders take charge of your men and let's have a safe transfer onto the trains." He then turned back to us before the officers broke ranks saying. "Listen to your Officers and NCOS and follow their orders lets show whoever is watching just how good we and our Battalion are." He then dismissed the Officers and they made their way over to their Companies giving out the orders to the NCOS that would get the Battalion moving down to the marshalling yards.

We set off out of the double doors of the warehouse and swung right onto the quay marched down it and then turned right again down the side of the warehouse we preceded down here until we reached the marshalling yards at the rear. We could see two trains waiting that were hissing and wheezing steam as we drew closer we could see that they both had the same configuration of rolling stock and that was one carriage four box cars and situated in between these three large flat bed wagons. We started to embark and we could see that two of the box cars were loaded with the Battalions kit which the local labour force had seen to so it just remained for the men to board and we would be on our way although this took a bit longer than had been expected. We watched as the Officers boarded the carriage which was a large one and looked like the ones we had seen in the westerns at the picture palace back in Blackthorn. So while the Officers got to ride in relative comfort the Poor Bloody Infantry got to ride in the box cars and flat bed wagons which gave us the pip and no mistake. You would have thought that a few more carriages could have been found after all we were not travelling a great distance. Major Danby was overseeing the embarkation and Frank asked him. "How far is it to Cairo from here Sir?" The Major thought for a minute and then replied. "It's about 120 miles give or take I would say Lord and you will enjoy the journey as the countryside is magnificent I just wish that I could be sat out here with you in the open air instead of in that stuffy carriage. This brought a lot of groans from the men listening to the conversation and some wag shouted. "Why don't you come and sit with us then?" The Major smiled ruefully and told us to hurry up and board as he turned a transportation Captain who was almost purple in the face from shouting at our men appeared. We gave him a huge jeer knowing that he would probably go and get a cold beer once he had seen the back of us whilst we sweated and chafed in the heat. He walked up to Major Danby saluted saying. "Please Sir could you get your men on board we have very strict schedules that we have to adhere to and there will be supply trains arriving shortly on this track for loading." He looked at the Captain a bit disdainful and said. "Alright Captain we won't be a moment and then you can get the train off come on lads jump to it get on board and then the Captain can play with his other trains." We scrambled on board one of the flat beds and sat down there were restraining chains fitted all around the wagon Elijah picked something off the floor and tossed it over the side narrowly missing the Captain who glared at him. Elijah said. "Bloody hell they used these to transport horses before we got them see that was a piece of horseshit that I just tossed over the side."

He was right as well as some of the other lads were finding out as they sat on and flattened pieces of horse shit that had been left behind. So as you can imagine there was quite a bit of grumbling going on as the train whistle blew and we pulled out of the marshalling yards. However this soon stopped as we got out into the Egyptian countryside chugging along and getting used to the new sights and smells that reminded us that we were in an exotic place. What Major Danby had said about the countryside being beautiful was true I had expected a load of sand and desert but this was not the case. Instead the countryside was green lush and fertile and we could see people working in the fields and we passed quite a few small villages that looked deserted. As we rode along we would sometimes pass children beside the track who would smile and wave at us and ask for baksheesh. We would smile and wave back but we had nothing to give them so some of the older children would turn their backs to us lift up their shirts and show us their bare asses. So we found a use for the dried horseshit on the flatbed we threw it to them and they thinking it was tobacco would fight for it whilst we curled up with laughter. As the engine huffed and puffed away from them we would hear howls of disgust from the kids as they found out what it really was we had thrown them and this would set us off laughing again. From what I could tell we seemed to be making good time and I thought this might be because the land was so flat because so far we had not climbed a single hill and there had been no tight bends only graceful curving ones. The warm breeze as we rolled along was refreshing and a lot of the lads went to sleep however I was too excited to bother about sleeping.

We came to a place called 'Kafer-El-Zayat' or so the sign said and here a huge bridge crossed a great river that I thought could only be the Nile because I had never seen one of this size in my life before. It was so awe-inspiring that people were being nudged awake just to look at its size and the looks on their faces said it all for in Blackthorn the only things running through the town were the

canal and the small trickle that was the river Blackwater so we had seen nothing like this before. Charlie stuttered saying. "Bloody hell look at the size of that river they won't be short of water round here will they?" We could only nod our heads in agreement as the train rattled over the iron bridge, looking on I thought that this was the first time I had seen the lads stuck for words but everyone just stared open mouthed as we crossed the waterway that was the life blood of Egypt. I hugged myself because I could not help feeling that I was one of the luckiest lads alive to be here seeing all these wonderful things at my age and I thanked god that I had joined up. The train rattled on and we crossed the river once more before we reached Cairo at a place called 'Benha' as the train steamed onwards towards our final destination. Elijah looked at us and said. "Listen lads after that debacle at the warehouse in Alexandria with the natives lets all keep our hands on our money and equipment and a weather eye on each other." Frank Lord replied. "Well said Elijah your absolutely right I mean lets face it if all those thieves and trinket sellers could get onto the docks and into the warehouses at Alexandria the it will be no trouble for them to congregate on a public railway station", so we all agreed to watch each other's backs.

We pulled into the station at Cairo and disembarked again we were all shocked into silence by the magnificence of not only the platform but of the station building itself and if the outside matched the inside then it would be a truly breathtaking sight. I mean you must remember that most of the lads of the Battalion were used to one platform country stations or town stations like Blackthorn. This station was huge and I would not be surprised if it could rival or surpass anything in London or any other capital of the world so fine was it and it was the ever informative Major Danby who told us it was of European-Moorish design with Doric columns and intricately patterned minarets plus it had a large central dome that simply took our breaths away. As we stood around in groups awaiting orders we stared in amazement at the diversity of the different types of people who were using the station and their variety of costumes whose colour was breathtaking. I noticed men and boys selling tea, coffee and water there were women selling sweetmeats and flat bread in fact there were sellers of every kind of objects and trinkets as well as the thieves and the rest of the under belly of society that as gathered in the station. The Egyptian police were there with their British officers and the Provosts to keep an eye on the troops as well as the Military Police and everywhere were transport officers running around like headless chickens. We could also see the diversity of troop's here there were Indian troops and more British, Australian and New Zealand French troops and their Colonial contingents there were even a few Russian Officers stood about and some Chinese coolies.

We could see plenty of hotel porters looking for their patrons and running up and down the platforms organising their luggage which would then be taken off to the hotels they represented. There was a wide assortment amongst these patrons who ranged from the obscenely wealthy to the bottom one suitcase end of the market these would I suppose be the people you get who are stranded when a war starts in a country with few means of leaving and even less money. I looked on and felt a little sorry for some of them who would be stuck here now I fancied for the duration of the war after all troops and supplies now had priority. As we looked around Major Danby walked back over to us saying. "It won't be long now lads just a few things to sort out and then we will be on our way." He noticed that we had been watching the porters and their charges and he said. "Ah looking at the hotel trade are you there a bit hard to miss in these places but I can tell you that the hotels here are world famous and sitting on the terraces having a drink will be a very elegant and cosmopolitan crowd rather like here." Gorge Drew replied to him saying. "Well swipe my bait I thought this place would have mud built buildings like the ones we saw on the train just a lot more of them." The Major looked at him like he was an imbecile and said. "Don't be an idiot Drew do you really think that a civilization who built the pyramids are not capable of building anything other than mud brick houses although you will find dwellings like that which haven't changed in thousands of years in the souks and poorer areas of Cairo and its out-lying districts." Elijah Mack chipped in. "Well now we know Sir." The Major looked at us rather exasperated saying. It's not really like you think let me try to explain to you the modern city of Cairo is based on a French example the modern city of Cairo is

based on a French example it has wide streets that are lined on either side with trees and fine buildings. Elsewhere in the city there are beautiful gardens and also monuments adorning the many squares this gives it the air of a great metropolis and I can only urge you to take a look round and see it if you get the chance. In light of this I would suggest then that instead of spending all your spare time drinking you take a couple of days off and view this magnificent city and do it the justice it deserves.

We stood thinking about what the Major had said and I knew that a lot of us would have a look at the city now that he had explained it to us I was still daydreaming when I heard Frank Lord say. "Do you know where we are going to Sir?" Major Danby replied, "As a matter of fact I do, we are going to a place called Mena Camp it is about fifteen miles outside the city situated at Giza close to the pyramids. The camp itself is an Australian one but we have been allowed to share a small part of it just to get acclimatised and we will not be there that long." I asked. "Why's that then Sir?" He smiled at me and said. "We will only be doing some training here and then we shall be moved to the British camp at Mex in Alexandria from there we will be deployed to guard the canal and give the Turks a good seeing to should they try anything. So here we were stood about on one of Cairo stations platforms waiting to be transported to some transit camp before having to return to where we had just come from. The aromas coming from the different beverages, foods and spices was both heady and mouth watering and a lot of the lads stood there with their mouths drooling and their bellies rumbling. The other side to this was the stench of unwashed stinking bodies and clothing which at times was almost overwhelming as was the amount of people crowding on to most of the platforms. We were alright though as the Egyptian police with a little encouragement from our MPs kept nearly everyone away from where we had formed up. Now and again however one or more of the Gypos or Arabs would get through and try to palm off some useless souvenirs on one of the lads but were given short shrift and told to piss off. We watched on as more than one of them was given a thrashing from the long thin canes the Egyptian police carried these would then hobble off to lick their wounds or to find easier pickings whilst we stared at everything in the station with the wide eyes of kids looking in a sweet shop window.

Just as we were beginning to think that we were stuck on the platform for the duration an event happened that had us all watching with morbid fascination and woke us from the boredom that had settled over us. We were stood at rest and had been given permission to smoke and George had just handed his cigarettes round to our little group who had just lit up when an almighty commotion started off on our right. Elijah shouted. "Eh up this chaps in a bit of a hurry maybe he's made off without paying for his round and with the look of him I can well believe it." He was right for running down the platform towards us was a man wearing a dirty white suit. He had the most evil ugly and most untrustworthy face that I think any of us had ever seen greasy black hair topped this off and on this he wore a red fez. His dark eyes flashed and he snarled as he took one look at our battalion and the veered away from us. The Military and Egyptian police that were chasing him were catching up to him and we could hear the sound of whistles blowing all round the station and there were more police closing in from the direction he had taken. Suddenly though he stopped and we thought he was catching his breath or maybe he intended to give himself up he had bent over but suddenly he straightened up. From out of his pocket he had pulled what looked to be an automatic pistol and he levelled it and proceeded to fire quite calmly at the police who had been chasing him an Egyptian policeman fell to the ground and one of our MPs was wounded. The shots rang out around the platform where our Battalion was stood our troops dropped to the ground as the MPs started to draw their weapons. In front of me a clear space opened up and before I knew what I was doing I had chambered a round into my rifle raised it sighted caressed the trigger and fired hearing the report in my ears. Red fez fell to the ground and blood seeped from the wound onto his non to clean white shirt making a red stain the pistol falling from his hand. I watched all this happen in a sort of detached way and then I lowered my weapon I walked to the trackside and there I threw up what little food was in my stomach. As I wiped my mouth with my hand and turned back towards the

Battalion I saw everyone looking at me some with curiosity and others with horror written on their faces then there were the old hands the NCOs who looked on with a grim sort of satisfaction.

Elijah was the first one of our group to speak to me saying. "Well I think was wrong about him not paying his round it's a bit more serious than that, anyway well done Billy Boy that was fucking quick thinking on your part otherwise he might have opened fire on us and killed a few." There were nods of agreement from the lads around us and some came over and slapped me on the back congratulating me on shooting red fez. I wasn't feeling too bad now that I had been sick which must have been a reaction I thought to killing another human being for although I was a good shot I had never fired at anything but targets up to now and hadn't killed so much as a rabbit. There was a commotion in the ranks around me and RSM Greaves and S/Sgt Domby appeared they walking up to where we stood and the RSM said. "Now then young Lamb what do you want to be shooting your rifle off for making loud noises and scaring the locals half to death?" I was just about to offer a hot reply when I saw the grin on S/Sgt Domby's face and then he winked at me saying. "That was a good shot Lamb in the heat of the moment in fact an excellent shot considering you've never done anything like this before." Both the RSM and I have been over and looked at the body and you nailed him right through the heart so there's no doubt you deserve your marksman's pay.

Even the RSM was smiling now so I asked. "Who was he Sir and why did he start shooting surely a few years in jail wasn't worth dying for?" The RSM replied. "According to the MPs we spoke to he was a Turkish spy and Military Intelligence was following him after he had picked up some information that was passed to him. He spotted the men who were following him and ducked into the station to lose them." Everyone looked over at red fez who's body was now surrounded by MPs who were being directed by the men from Intelligence in their search of the body, they took some papers from the inside of his jacket and the men from Intelligence scanned them and then put them away. The RSM continued saying. "When he saw he was in danger and that the net was closing on him and especially when he nearly ran into our Battalion he must have got the shock of his life. So he was in a desperate situation and decided to fight it out but what he hadn't expected to come across was hot shot Lamb here." I blushed to the roots of my hair on hearing this and the lads were having a rare old laugh at my expense. The RSM said. "Quite lads, there is a serious side to this espionage saga but what I really want to say is that you did your duty young Lamb and you did it well. But that's what you are paid for and waste no time on him after all he was a spy and an enemy of our country and if he had been caught he would have been stood against a wall and shot anyway. So don't have any qualms about killing him because by your actions you probably saved some of your own comrades from getting killed or wounded."

After this the Colonel came along to have a word with me and he said pretty much the same as the RSM had. I was also spoken to by some of the Battalion Officers who congratulated me and the Major in charge of the MPs came over and thanked me for shooting the spy. However no matter what they said I still felt a little unsure about killing the man in the red fez. But I suppose that I would have to get used to this after all there was a war on and when we met up with the Turks there would be a lot more killing so I contented myself with this. It was a short time after this incident when red fez had been deposited on a stretcher and carried off that we were still stood on the platform bored once more by the waiting. The Colonel was with the Transportation Officer working out the details of the route we would take to the camp or at least trying to in the chaos that was going on around the station. Then all of a sudden the NCOs were bawling out orders and shouting at men to get fell in and then we formed up into Companies and started to move off.

We arrived at Mena Camp in the evening and once again we were left with our mouths open catching flies at the sight only this time it was physical because there seemed to be flies everywhere. As we looked round we could see set out before us a vast expanse of tents in fact it was more a city of tents with a main road running down the middle and side roads were branching off this. We were told that this was one of the main camps of the A.I.F. (Australian Imperial Force) and as we looked

out on it we couldn't believe that there were that many tents in the army let alone in this camp. The tents that were allocated to us were near to the Australian 9th and 10th Infantry Battalions and as we marched past we glanced at these strangers from the other side of the world. We saw that they were tall lean and dark skinned men tanned from a lifetime in the sun and they had a casual air about them that suited them down to the ground. They seemed athletic compared to us and their movements flowed together rather like a cats and with an ease in everything they did. The Australians watched us as we went by and there was a fair bit of banter shouted our way but our lads gave as good as they got. Behind the 9th and 10th tents a sandy ridge had built up and beyond this jutting up and reaching for the sky stood an ancient pyramid its bulk huge to the eyes. Stretching out everywhere else was the flat featureless desert with only a few more sand ridges to break it up here and there and it looked infinite and desolate as it spread out into the distance for as far as the eye could see.

From what we could see the Australian areas were marked out by coloured flags and we marched past until we came to an area marked out with red flags and here we were halted. The sun beat remorselessly down on us as we were stood at ease but all we wanted to do was fall out and get into our tents for a bit of shade. It would also have been bliss to take off our kit and have sit down and rest for a bit as we had been travelling all day and we were all tetchy and tired now. Charlie Slater said. "Fucking hell it's hotter than Hades out here why don't they just get on with it and get us under cover before we melt?" S/Sgt Domby growled at him. "Think yourself lucky that you don't have to suffer the killing heat of the Northern summer yet otherwise you would be able to fry an egg on Pte Mack's head." This brought a hurt look to Elijah's face and a peal of laughter from the platoon still I could not help thinking if we were hot now what would we be like when the really hot weather came round? Though to tell the truth the heat didn't really bother me because after working in the foundry this was pretty much normal to me although some of the other lads weren't so lucky. A short time later we were assigned to our tents and the lads piled into them thankful to get out of the sun and its heat it was good to be able to stow our kit away. But once inside the tents it was stifling so everyone was soon sat outside again in small groups George said. "I will be glad when night comes and this infernal heat dies away what do you say lads?" Before anyone had a chance to reply we were fell in on parade again and the usual fatigues and working parties were allocated amongst us.

Time went by and we had been at Mena for a couple of weeks and we were now getting into the swing of things and the heat had stopped bothering people as much although the fatigues and working parties seemed endless. We got on fairly well with the Australian troops and who seemed to wander where they pleased on a whim and we got the impression that they were not very keen on discipline or Officers and this seemed especially true of British Officers. Although they seemed to look on their own Officers with tolerated affection but then again they were a lot different than ours for the Australian Officers were easier going in their outlook than any of ours. What really surprised us though was the 10th mascot which was we were told a wallaby which they had fetched with them all the way from home and which most of our lads had never seen let alone up close. Training was mostly in the mornings this was because the High Command had found out that training in oppressive heat did more harm than good and resulted in more men becoming ill with heatstroke and dehydration. So it was decided that instead of doing eight hours that five would be more appropriate and that when the sun was at its hottest the men should rest and conserve their energy. This would have been perfect but for the fact that the majority of the troops were fit young men so in the early evening rather than resting there would be a mass exodus in the direction of Cairo for a night of drinking and visiting the brothels. We had trained this morning and were now queued up for the midday meal chatting and standing about because you could wait anything up to an hour to receive your portion of stew which was supplemented by hard biscuits and a mug of hot strong sweet tea. There were the usual moans about the grub but a lot of the lads especially the ones from the poorer families were eating three meals a day for the first time in their lives so these had no complaints whatsoever. During training however we carried so called dry rations which was usually bully beef

and hard biscuits that would turn into a greasy morass in the heat and which you ended up pouring out of the tins.

After our meal we headed back over to our tent and sat outside talking and smoking Frank Lord said. "What do you fancy doing this afternoon lads seeing as there are no fatigue or working parties planned?" Gorge asked. "Have we no guard duty then?" Elijah replied. "No not today it is someone else's turn for a change so we better find something to do to pass the time I suppose." We nodded our heads although really we were supposed to rest at this time but it was impossible to sleep with the heat that smothered the inside of the tents. Charlie said. "Let's go to the pyramids and see what's going on there?" Frank laughed saying. "Yes lest get over there those mad Aussie bastards are bound to be around playing that funny game of rugby or they might have cricket match on." So it was settled and we decided to walk over to the pyramids to see what was happening because it was something to do and it would take up some time and would be better than sitting outside the tent all afternoon attracting the flies that constantly sought us out. As we reached the flat plateau that hosed the pyramids we could see gathered at the base of the nearest one quite a crowd so we stood and watched what was going on. Charlie walked over and had a word with one of the Aussies then he turned round and came back to us saying. "There's some kind of race going on between some of the Aussies on who can reach the top of the pyramid first, not only that there are blokes taking bets if anyone's interested.?" We walked closer to the crowd and Elijah laughingly said. "Trust the bloody Aussies to be doing something like this I just knew we would get a laugh out of them." We looked over at them and then out of nowhere Bert asked. "I wonder whose place this is; you know who it was built to house when they died?" There was no answer because we didn't know who it had been built for and we certainly weren't bothered so Bert gave up his musings and ran to catch us up.

As we arrived the betting was going well in fact there was a brief flurry of betting going on with people eager to lay their money down on their favourite though the six racers were getting impatient to start the race. The men running the book were trying to squeeze the last drop of money from the erstwhile punters but the racers would stand for no more and shouted at them to start the race. With regret they waved off any more punters and the race got underway with the contestants scrambling up the pyramids side however it was steep and a huge and they soon slowed down taking their time. We shook our heads walking away and leaving them and their fans to it further along there was a cricket match taking place and we joined in for a bit. But this was no ordinary game of cricket for the batsmen faced a volley of up to a dozen balls that were bowled at them they hit the balls and the fielders scrambled after them. No runs were scored and the batters were replaced when their wickets were taken by either a bowler or fielder which at times could get confusing due to the amount of balls being hit. Eventually the game broke up as the evening meal was ready and so we returned to camp to pick up our mess tins mugs and utensils and to go and wait in line for our grub.

We had got our food and returned to sit outside the tent to eat it when I noticed a line of what looked like black thunderclouds on the horizon I casually pointed them out to the lads. George said. "Next you'll be telling us it's going to rain." Charlie Slater butted in saying. "It never rains in the desert does it?" Frank replied. "Of course it does you bloody idiot it just doesn't do it so often or very much." I had lost all interest in the conversation and the bloody clouds I was just trying my best to stop the flies eating my meal before I could. We all returned to shovelling our grub down and foiling the flies darkness began to fall the stars appeared everywhere apart from where the storm clouds had been gathering. As we continued eating the storm intensified and blue white flashes of lightning streaked across the sky and then stabbed at the earth the thunder boomed and the storm came closer. As we finished our meal the thunder and lightning grew in stature and there were startling explosive cracks in the sky also the flies that had been such an annoyance seemed to understand what was happening and had buggered off to wherever flies go when the weathers bad. The storm when it came was preceded by a breeze which had the unmistakable smell of rain on it and it came on swift wings as the black clouds blotted the stars from the sky overhead. The lightning was striking so close to us now that the ground was trembling and the light from it was throwing the

tents and soldiers everywhere into a hard black and white relief. Elijah said. "I think it's time we got under cover lads before we get hit by lightning or soaked." We watched as mesmerised as the storm front made its way towards us and to our eyes it looked like a huge fog bank drifting towards us. However we soon found out that this illusion was a solid curtain of rain that was falling so hard you could hear it pound into the sand. The fascination ended and we scrambled back into the tent gathering any kit that was near the flaps or sides and moving it out the way just as the first big wet drops thudded against the tent. We looked out and saw some of the lads dancing and shouting with joy because it was raining but this did not last long as the rain came down like iron rods and the shouting turned to curses as it stung their skin and they beat a hasty retreat into shelter.

The storm crackled and exploded around the camp the lightning hissed through the air and the rain lashed against the tents. We all thought that the storm would abate rather quickly but it didn't only the thunder and lightning moved off across the desert and towards Cairo leaving a steady downpour covering the camp. The fires around the camp had been extinguished by the torrential downpour and the sand seemed hard packed but in places was soft and quite gooey and sticky. Charlie said. "Well what are we going to do tonight let's head for Cairo and get some booze down us?" Frank replied. "Wait a minute there's an exercise tomorrow and if we drink the rot gut down in town we will be in a pretty rough state in the morning." Charlie exasperated shouted. "Come on lad's there's nothing better to do around here is there?" I knew that I had to say something so I said. "I agree with Frank its dark out now and it's about ten miles into the outskirts of Cairo and it is also pissing down with rain in case you hadn't noticed." Quick as a flash Charlie retorted. "Exactly and that means that the exercise might be called off and with the rain battering against the tent we aren't going to get much sleep so we might as well fit a little recreation in." So we ended up setting off down the narrow track that was the main route that soldiers took to Cairo the rain and mud had made it a little treacherous. It was full of soldiers walking both ways and transports pulled by horses sprayed people with mud as the rumbled past along the track. However we were fir lads now after all the training and we made good time along the muddy track despite the mud and water and the other people using the track. Soon we could see the lights of Cairo sparkling in the distance and we increased our pace the sooner to reach it as the lightning lit up the track and city in the distance.

We had just caught up and were about to overtake three Aussies in front of us when from under one of the slouch hats the Aussies wore we heard a voice that we recognised say. "How are you boys then, Judging by the speed your going I would say that you were on your way to the flesh pots of old Cairo am I right? Me and the lads are on our way for a night on the town so if you don't mind we will tag along with you?" We knew the three Aussies and had met them when we first arrived at Mena they were Corporal Archie Lane who was the one who had spoken, Snowy Jones and Ben Harrington they had become good friends of ours showing us where to go on our days off and stopping us getting ripped off by the Arabs they were easy going and good fun to be with and we liked them a lot. George said. "Where shall we go then we need to be somewhere warm and dry on a night like this and we also need to get pissed?" Snowy replied. "The 'Wozzer' of course where else." As he said this a horse drawn gun-carriage thundered past us the gun litter full of drunken Artillerymen on their way back to Mena. Snowy shouted. "Watch it you drongos!" But he shouted to no avail as the gun-team disappeared into the darkness hell bent on getting back to camp and discharging its cargo of men. We carried on walking towards the area the Aussies had christened the 'Wozzer' which was in fact short for Haret El Wasser which was on the outskirts of the city and consisted of souks brothels and cheap drinking places. As we got closer the transition from rural area to urban dwellings happened very quickly and we approached a line of white mud brick houses that announced the beginnings of the district and the cramped crowded conditions that these urban Egyptians had to put up with.

We were making our way down narrow dimly lit alleys on the familiar route that we usually used when getting to the 'Wozzer' and around us in the darkness native children watched with big

round eyes. The buildings we passed were lit by oil lamps and candles which threw a suffused glow out between the gaps on the closed shuttered windows catching us in their small glows as we walked past. The fact that we were out in number made things easier usually had there only been a few of us we would have been searching the shadows for any movement which would show us where there were unseen attackers in wait. Most of these would hide and then waylay any unsuspecting soldier who got split up from his mates robbing him of his money and possessions in some cases they would murder and they would do this for small amounts of money because life was cheap round here. As we got into the 'Wozzer' proper we could tell that the rain was having little effect on the business down here in fact people were doing a roaring trade. Because this was an area that was a combination of dozens of dingy drinking houses and a prostitutes quarter whose hygiene standards were dubious to say the least. It also contained a Bazaar that consisted of hundreds of small stalls selling everything imaginable and the smell of exotic spices and of herbs filled your nostrils as you walked by. There were Basil and Thyme Rosemary and Tarragon to name a few then the heady aroma of Cardamom, Cinnamon and cloves wafted and the colours were amazing spices like Saffron, Sumac and Tamarind. All kinds of ingredients were on sale exotic seeds and fruits as well as plants there was Aniseed, and Nutmeg as well as Chilli Peppers and Mustard, Coriander, Fennel and Dill. All these aromas combined together to assault your sense of smell with all the subtlety and ambience of a tramps vest on a hot summer's day and it made your mind drift and think of far off foreign lands. Each of the bars offered their own wine and you drank it at your own risk as most of these were more toxic than alcoholic after all it got you drunk which was the main thing and there was a war on and who knew how long they would live. So everyone drank and said to hell with the consequences I mean who was bothered if it came close to poisoning you at the same time life was for living because death was round the corner.

As always down here there was a press of people and we pushed our way through the crowds as merchants and street sellers pressed in on us from all sides harassing us and trying to sell us things and shouting in our faces every foot of the way. The rain added a new stench to that of so many bodies close together it was a sour mildew smell that filled the air like a rotting corpse. The main street we were walking down was usually well lit but the rain had doused many of the naked flames used to light the area and the ones that were left cast an eerie glow on the buildings. The light flickered with a life of its own it danced and capered on the walls and in this kind of atmosphere you could well believe that you were back in the time of the Pharaohs. We walked into one of the bars I don't remember the name properly now but it was something the Aussies had a name for as they did for all of the bars. This made it easier for them to tell people where they were going and as nobody could pronounce the local names for them anyway it made sense. I think the one we were now in was called the Stinging Scorpion or something after some Aussie soldier was stung by one in the bar this was shortened to the Stinger. They always had names like these and this showed what a good sense of humour they had and also that they were unflappable which was one of the things I first likes about them. As we got in it was packed inside and the noise was tremendous as it assailed your ears there were people telling jokes and others laughing at them insults were being traded backward and forward across the room. Also there was a thick fug of tobacco smoke that you could cut with a knife and over the top of all this was the smell of wet woollen clothing drying off. Because of this we stayed near the door and the bit of fresh air that tried to fight its way inside whilst George and Archie fought their way to the bar and a short time later appeared again with their arms full of wine bottles. Archie said. "Here you go blokes get those down your necks and then we will get some more after all the nights young yet and it's better than being out in the rain or back at camp so cheers." Charlie took a large drink of the wine then he took the bottle from his lips coughing and spluttering and saying. "Bloody hell Archie what the fuck's in this stuff is it shit or camel piss or a tramps bath water?" I for one could well believe it had them all in it but we all drank our bottles down and Frank and Snowy went up for some more.

Things were going well and there was some bloke playing the mouth organ and everyone was singing and having a good time and clapping each other on the back comrades and good friends. By

this time the wine was starting to take effect and I was feeling more pissed by the minute which was no bad thing when you had to drink this stuff. George and Archie were standing on the other side leaning on a wall with their heads together talking and looking over at me so I smiled at them and didn't think anymore about it. We left the Scorpion and headed down the street to Black Jack's another den of iniquity and if anything could be a bigger flea pit than the Scorpion. It was named Black Jack's by the Aussies because the bloke who owned it was a big black skinned fellow who had ended up here in the 'Wozzer' for some reason when he was on route from Africa to Spain. Looking at him he seemed as savage as some of his ancestors and had a large head covered in tight dark curly hair. On his face he carried the marks of tribal tattoos that gave him a look of unbridled ferocity and he was one of the few blacks that the Aussies would talk to without swearing at or beating up.

Inside it was exactly the same layout as the Scorpion and the rest of the drinking dens down here in the 'Wozzer' they were all the same. Every one of them had the blanket cloud of cigarette smoke like the others the same smell of sweating unwashed bodies and the same lethal liquid that was passed off as alcohol. Ben went up to the bar and I went to go with him and buy my round but I felt a hand on my arm restraining me. It was Archie and he said. "Hold on a minute young Billy Boy you can get your round in one of the other places see I need a word with Black Jack a bit of business to discuss", and he tapped the side of his nose with his finger. I shrugged my shoulders and replied. "That's alright by me Arch I can just as easily get my round later." He smiled at me and walked away I wondered what business he could have with Black Jack but then again you could buy anything in here from a murder to a carpet. Leaving my curiosity to the side for a moment I said to him. "I will come to the bar and give you two a hand with the bottles it will be quicker with three of us." Archie replied. "No that's alright you stay with the lads me and Ben can manage a few bottles of rot gut we will be back in two shakes", and he and Ben pushed their way towards the bar. I felt a bit put out but Frank said. "Don't look so worried it's just Archie's way he looks on you like his little brother and doesn't want to see you skint. Listen the lads told him about the allowances that you are sending back home to Rosie and Beth so it's his way of looking out for you." I listened to this as I watched Ben elbow his way back from the bar his arms full of bottles but Archie stayed at the bar and him and Black Jack had their heads together like two old tom cats planning a night out on the tiles. They were animatedly discussing their business and it looked none to legal if the way they kept looking around was anything to go by. I would have kept watching but George grabbed my arm and spun me back towards the group he shoved a bottle into my hand saying. "Come on Billy Boy join the fun and stop moping over there." So I forgot about Black Jack and Archie and whatever business deal they were planning and joined in the fun with the lads.

We finished drinking in Black Jack's and made our way back out into the teeming main street of the 'Wozzer' the Aussies as usual were using their unique charm and shoving the locals out of the way while calling them gyppo's and wogs. For some reason the Australians had a concentrated contempt not just for the Egyptians but for anyone who was the slightest bit dark skinned that we never matched and they would hit or kick them at the slightest provocation. Mind you this might have had something to do with the thefts that went on all the time not just here in the 'Wozzer' but back at Mena as well. Because anything that wasn't nailed down or guarded was sure to be stolen and the shady and sometimes dubious business practices of the locals left much to be desired. Archie had just sent a small man in a caftan sprawling in the water this happened because of the man's persistent begging for baksheesh and his inability to take no for an answer. Archie turned round grinning at us saying. "That will teach the perishing little gyppo bastard that no means no." Meanwhile the small fellow had picked himself up dripping with water and he now ran off shouting what sounded like a whole lot of Egyptian curse at us and Archie in particular. Of course he was wasting his breath because Arch took as much notice of him as he would have of one of the bugs that were crawling everywhere down here. As we made our way down the main part of the district Snowy said. "Let's get another drink shall we?" Archie answered him saying. "Wait a bit Snow and well get one later on there's a bit of business to attend to first." By now we were well inside the prostitute's quarter and I wondered what business Archie had in mind and how much further we would have to

go to attend to it. All this ran through my mind as we stopped outside a house where the women stood outside and hung through the open windows, they shouted and gesticulated to us and there was little doubt in our minds what they were offering.

George and Archie went up to a very seedy looking and non to clean Egyptian with greasy hair and a pocked marked face and it would seem that he owned the place as they started haggling with him. I looked at the dregs that plied their wares here and the ones Stelios had shown us in Alexandria and there was no comparison they had been clean and beautiful while some of the ones here looked as though they had gone five rounds with an angry bear and hadn't had a wash since they were born. George and Archie came back having fixed a price with gyppo that ran the place and Archie said. "Right lads me and George have paid the bloke that owns the place so you can settle up with us after alright." The proprietor with his pocked marked face was all smiles now bowing and scraping before the lads and inviting them to sample his wares. I thought I would find somewhere quite to sit whilst the rest went in and did what they had to do but fate was against me or so it seemed. Archie grabbed me saying. "Oh no you don't Billy Boy if you're old enough to fight for your country and face the wily Turk, then your old enough to lose your virginity." I turned round and told them that I wasn't interested in joining them but they just weren't listening and George now came up on my other side securing my arm and him and Archie dragged me into the building. I tried to tell them I wasn't interested in these old sots and that I was more worried about catching something than losing it. Inside the building was lit by oil lamps and candles and there were small rooms with curtains over the entrances running along either side of the passage. This they told me later made it quite a posh establishment although I said to them that it didn't look so posh to me. We passed by these rooms and started climbing the stairs and it was then that I realised what Gorge and Archie had been discussing so ardent in the Scorpion and what Archie's business with Black Jack had been.

When we got to the top of the stairs we went along the landing and George held the curtain of the second room open as Archie shoved me through. As I was propelled into the room I got the shock of my young life as I saw lying on the bed an Egyptian woman whose age I could only guess at but who must have been thirty easily not only that she was as naked as the day she was born. I didn't know where to look and my face must have been a picture because Archie burst out laughing and said. "What do you think of that Billy Boy I bet you haven't seen anything like that before at least not from the women back home." Of course he was right although I had heard all the talk at work from the married men and some of the other blokes would brag about what they had done I never thought I would see a naked woman till my wedding night and then it would be my bride. I tried to avert my eyes but it didn't work and I couldn't help looking as curiosity got the better of me the first thing I saw however was the look of boredom and resignation on the woman's face then my gaze travelled down and took in the large breasts with swollen nipples. The woman made no attempt to cover herself as my gaze travelled over her body I was now below her waist and my eyes must have popped out for at the base of her stomach was a thatch of thick black hair covering her womanhood so I quickly looked away. I kept trying to think thoughts of Helen holding her hand but my mind betrayed me and all it saw much to its shame was the large breasts and coarse thatch of the old woman on the bed. To make matters worse and much to my horror I was beginning to get an erection that was very hard and very uncomfortable and strained to escape from my pants. This was just embarrassing I tuned to Archie and George and said. "Look lads I don't know what to do and anyway I couldn't do it with her she's far too old and besides I have Helen at Home and I swore I would be true." George replied. "Listen Billy Boy our girls are back at home and tomorrow we might be killed and you wouldn't want that without having become a proper man first so don't worry, do you think I had ever done this before we came here and my first time was with someone worse than her." I still felt lost and that this was wrong but like they said Helen was back home and we were still a long way from marriage and this would be experience but I knew I couldn't touch the one on the bed. Archie spoke to me saying. "Listen Billy Boy you're like one of my own and I know that it's your first time but hell there's a war on and besides which the one on the isn't for you so if you don't like

yours then so be it.” He said something to the woman on the bed and she shouted something in her language and the curtain over the back room was drawn back and my breath once more was held in.

Through the curtain dressed in a loose shift stepped a young girl of about seventeen she had a slim figure from what I could see beneath the shift, jet black long hair a beautiful heart shaped face and the deepest brown eyes I had ever seen. I was totally taken aback and mesmerised by her appearance and my stomach flipped over a bit for I had never seen a girl as exotic or like her in my life before. I cursed myself for being disloyal to Helen but something about this girl was getting to me and I couldn't resist what was happening no matter what I thought I tried looking at the old sot on the bed to dampen my ardour but my eyes kept returning to the girl and I knew I was captivated. Archie had seen the transformation on my face and said. “I can see you like this one better now don't worry about back home what happens here stays here this will just give you some experience so that when the time comes you won't fumble about with your Helen. Besides which getting hold of her has cost a small fortune and all the lads have chipped in so no arguing go with her and come back out a man mate.” I listened to him and thought in part he was right and that this would be experience so that on our wedding night I wouldn't look foolish to Helen when it was our turn to do it and also I must admit that I was overwhelmed with curiosity as to what it would be like. So I let the girl take my hand and lead me through the curtain and into the other room the curtain fell back into place with a slight rustle.

On entering she let go of my hand and moved over to the bed then with one quick movement she whipped the shift over her head letting it fall to the floor and stood there naked before me. She displayed no embarrassment at either doing this or of standing there in front of me I was in a state of shock and excitement at what had happened. I had no idea what would happen when we came in here but I thought we might just get on the bed with our clothes on she would just lift up her shift I would undo my flies we would do the deed and that would be that. I stood frozen and just looked at her she was the most beautiful thing I had seen apart from Helen. The girl's skin glowed and was golden brown like honey in the candlelight and the flickering radiance seemed to burnish her skin making it exotic and alluring. I took in her body noticing everything and taking pleasure in seeing it she was nothing like the old sot in the other room and the thought of her plus the wine nearly made me retch. I noticed that her breasts were small but firm and well formed with small nipples which stood out and her build as I thought was slim my gaze continued and I could see the start of a silky black triangle at the base of her stomach. Sitting down on the edge of the bed she motioned me to get undressed this unnerved me and I shook my head bloody hell no woman had ever seen my underwear before let alone seen me naked. She laughed at this stood up and came over to me she began to unbutton my tunic I grabbed her hand and protested but she looked into my eyes and I saw something there that made me drop my hand. She continued taking my jacket off after this much to my surprise she whispered in my ear that I should finish the rest by myself I had no idea she understood English let alone spoke some. Knowing this seemed to spur me on and I had my shirt off now and was beginning to undo my trousers with shaking hands and I must admit that I was burning with curiosity to find out what was going to happen. I stood before her in my underwear and asked her where she had learned to speak English, she told me she had learned in a missionary school at an orphanage where she had grown up.

She now told me to take off my underwear but again I shook my head I could never do that not in front of a stranger and a girl as well. But she took my hand and guided me to the bed where she removed the last of my clothing without batting an eyelid. Now we were both naked and she took my hands and pressed them to her body moving them where she wanted me to touch her and her skin felt like it was on fire. Of course she was no virgin and showed me exactly what to do and what to touch and I must admit that I didn't think I did that bad for a first time and I must admit that I was now glad that I hadn't run off. I looked at the girl led beside me and I didn't even know her name let alone much else so I asked her what she was called and she said whatever I wanted to call her and I told her no I wanted her real name but she shook her head and so I left it though I felt a touch of

sorrow that I didn't know it and she wouldn't tell me. As I looked at the ceiling I thought no wonder people liked doing this it was the most amazing thing I had experienced or felt in my life. I am glad to say though that the girl had no intensions of letting me get away just yet and she reached across and fondled me. Well that was all it took and I had the chance to fuck her again before Archie shouted through the curtain that my time was up and that we should be going. As I got dressed I looked at the girl who had put her shift back on and wondered what kind of life she must have had to have such experience of this thing at her age. I told her I was going but she just sat on the bed looking totally disinterested and I suppose this was because she had done her job anyway I said cheerio again and went to join Archie and the rest of the lads outside.

The rain had stopped now and we made our way back to Black Jack's as we were walking Archie said to me. "Well Billy Boy how did you like your first time? There's no mistake tonight you became a man I reckon that little Shelia really knew her stuff eh?" The rest of the lad's were grinning fit to bust and Snowy Ben and a couple more slapped me on the back congratulating me. I replied to Archie saying. "It was good mate and I liked it fine it was the best time I've had in my life up to now and I'm glad I did it." Archie laughed and said. "I told you didn't I and there was you not wanting to do it until we persuaded you, just think what you would have missed if we hadn't." I stopped and looked at my friends then told them. "Listen I am grateful to you all for chipping in and giving me this gist but that is the last time I do that until I marry Helen it was fantastic and I am glad I did it but the only woman I want to be like that with again is in England." The lads understood what I was saying and readily agreed the subject was changed and we entered Black Jack's and didn't leave until we were pissed making our way back to camp and our very wet beds.

Time was now moving on and by the middle of April the rest of the Battalion had completed acclimatisation and training and was now on the move. However half of our platoon was not Elijah, the Lord twins Charlie and I along with quite a few more were picked to make up a composite Company which would be lent to the 1st Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers who at the moment were under strength. We would be we were told attached to the 86th Brigade of the 29th Division though what was happening we still didn't know but a lot of the Australians were due to ship out including our mates Archie Snowy and Bill. The rest of our Battalion were sent off to Mex Camp at Alexandria for duty guarding the Suez Canal. In our made up Company we had Major Danby in charge Captain Thornley and we had our Platoon Officer young Lt. Walter Cole and in C.S.M Domby who had been made up to Company Sergeant Major we had another friend. Meanwhile the Adjutant Captain Melstone had managed to wangle a position with us and also we had Sgt Dawson Sgt Ted Wallace Cpl Kenny and Nobby Clark another mate of ours and who would be coming with us. We said goodbye to the rest of our friends as the Battalion prepared to leave Frank Lord came over and took his leave of the twins then of Elijah and Charlie lastly he came to me and said. "Look after yourself Billy Boy remember your only young yet so don't be doing anything silly or heroic just keep your head down and keep an eye on your mates. You can't do much better than that and anyway Elijah and the rest of the lads will be looking out for you." I replied. "Thanks Frank and don't worry I will be careful and like you said I have the lads with me." We shook hands and I hugged him saying. "You take care of yourself as well we don't want anything happening to you either." He nodded his head and smiled as we parted and then George came over and said. "Take care Billy Boy I wish I was coming with you but we can't anyway don't let anything happen to you because I couldn't face the folks back home if it did." I mustered my bravado saying. "Look George don't worry about me we are probably going to guard some supplies or something and you will probably see a Turk before us. He shook his head looking doubtful hugged me and then turned away and stumbled off I must admit I had a lump in my throat after he had gone. Then it was Bert's turn he said. "Well Billy Lad I suppose the rest have said it all so I will just wish you good luck and thank you for what you did at my Mother's funeral it meant a lot to me. So don't do anything daft like getting yourself killed leave the glory stuff to someone else and look after yourself and the lads." We hugged and there were tears in both our eyes as we released each other I looked at him saying. "We

will be back before you know it I mean how hard can it be where were going. We also have the Aussies and some of our Brigade and anyway we are probably only going to make up the numbers.”

We cheered and waved as the rest of the Battalion made their way out of camp heading for the railway station and the journey to Alexandria. Later on when things had quietened down we were paraded and told that we would do a few days extra training on completion of this we would join the Lancashire Fusiliers on board a ship which would then take us to our objective. Major Danby paused and Charlie stepped in saying. “Could you tell us Sir what the objective is if you wouldn’t mind?” The major eyed Charlie up and down I suppose to see if he was being insolent then he replied. At the moment Pte Slater that doesn’t concern you if and when the time comes that it does then you will be told.” Charlie said out of the side of his mouth. “Typical isn’t it that’s the army all over for you keeps you in the dark without a bloody candle.” The Major told us what a great honour it was to be attached to the Fusiliers for this operation as they were regular army and had only just returned from India. We trained hard over the next few days and as our training progressed we began to hear rumours about a big show that was coming up against the Turks in the Dardanelles in a place called Gallipoli. We knew no more about this place or if the rumour was true than if the moon was made of green cheese and though we kept open minds still Gallipoli kept being mentioned. Once our training was finished our Company left Mena embarking at the station and travelling to Alexandria where we joined the Lancashire Fusiliers on board HMS Euryalus. We then sailed and were finally told the rumours had been right we were headed for Gallipoli and on the early morning of April 25th we arrived to join the rest of the fleet off Cape Helles. We were told that the Australians had been here for a few days now but a storm had stopped their landings which should have taken place on the 23rd. I hoped Archie Snowy and Ben were alright as I knew they were with the Australian forces here and I hoped we could join up with them once we chased the Turks back to Constantinople. Major Danby told us that there were six thousand of us in the covering force and that we would be landing with the Lancashire Fusiliers and the HQ Company of the 86th Brigade.

We had a briefing telling us that after the naval bombardment finished there would be few of the enemy left alive and that as our boats rowed in to assault the beaches that opposition should only be light. Once we had landed C Company along with half of our E Company which included me and the lads would assault and take the trenches in the centre and on the left, once this was achieved we were to push on and take Hill 114. Meanwhile A and B Companies along with the other half of E were to move up the right side and take the redoubt on Hill 138. This then in a nutshell was the plan and we were reassured that it would be a piece of cake a walk over and all the other silly platitudes that people said and you knew for sure in your heart that something was going to go badly wrong.

Chapter Seven

As the Dreadnought Euraylus opened up its bombardment of the Turkish positions on W Beach at Cape Helle’s it sounded as if the heavens themselves might fall down such was the noise from the guns of the fleet. I don’t know about the Turks but it scared me and my mates to death just listening to it thunder overhead and watching it smash into the enemy positions throwing up huge plumes of dirt and smoke. Some of the shells from the guns were so large that you could watch them following their trajectory as they raced towards the enemy. We waited for the bombardment to finish then we would disembark onto lifeboats then a string of these would be pulled by steam launches. When we got as close to shore as possible the boats would be cast off and the naval ratings manning the oars would row us in over the final stretch and land us on the beach. We were in the boats and

the steam launches were towing us behind them I looked over the side and the water looked a beautiful blue colour and you could see quite away down through it. I was lucky really because all my mates were in my boat Elijah, Charlie the Lord Brothers and Sgt Dawson the rest were all Fusiliers. Elijah looked across at me as the steam launch continued to tow us and the rest of the string of boats through the choppy swell. He said. "Well it's not much like being on Queens Park boating lake on a Sunday afternoon still where else could you get paid for taking a sea cruise, no what I say is all aboard the Skylark." I thanked God that we had Elijah on our boat and in our platoon for it was now he showed what a mate he was by cheering me and the lads up as we rowed ashore Elijah was one of those people who faced life head on and didn't let it get him down. I replied. "Queens Park sounds quite a nice place to be right now though I wish the water was as blue and as clear as what it is here." Charlie joined in saying. "I wouldn't mind being there myself at the moment what with a nice young lady on my arm so everyone would admire us champion." The Lord Brothers looked at Charlie and burst out laughing while Elijah lifted his eyes to heaven to let Charlie know what he thought of his daydream.

The shore was coming closer and everything was deadly quiet as we chugged in towards it the lads all wrapped up now in their own world their own personal thoughts, then all of a sudden we could hear the crack thump of bullets passing by us as we came in closer. All of a sudden the steam launch veered to its left and took our string of boats with it as we passed the spot where it had just been I saw rocks just under the water so thank God the Coxswain had been on his toes. He had found a gap in the rocky outcrop and he cast our string of boats off and turned to return to the ship and pick up more. As our ratings rowed us closer to the shore the rifle fire became fiercer it was pinging off the boats or buzzing overhead and we watched as a lot plopped into the water I saw this but felt as though I was somewhere else it was most strange. Just then Charlie got a bullet graze across the back of his hand which started to bleed he yelled and shouted. "Who the hell's shooting at us what's going on? I thought we were just supposed to stroll up the beach after that bombardment that's what they told us the bastards." As we rowed closer we could hear jeering and shouting from some of the boats but as the shore neared dramatically these stopped to be replaced by the cries and pain of men who were being wounded and dying in the boats. All of a sudden one of the sailors who were sat near to me pulling on his oar slumped over looking like a discarded rag doll. His mates whose strokes had been thrown off gave him hell little realising for the moment that he was dead that only came when they saw the blood running down from his wound and pooling in the bottom of the boat. There was no time to dwell on this because now there was a deadly fire pouring into all the boats in ours we were taking a lot of casualties and the bottom of the boat was covered in water and blood which sloshed around beneath our feet. Up to now however it had been the sailors and Fusiliers who had borne the brunt but we knew this could not last as the boat had lost headway due to the crew being hit some of our lads grabbed the oars and began to row. Big splinters of wood were flying up into the air as our boat was hit countless times by bullets and the noise amplified inside the hull where we crouched taking cover and sounded all the more frightening. I was staring into the eyes of a dead sailor who had half his head shot away I could see this grey stuff mixed with the blood but at this time I didn't know that it was the fellow's brain. I was terrified and wished that I was back at home in a nice warm bed and that this was only a bad dream but I knew it wasn't and I just threw up into the bottom of the boat where it mixed in with the bits of flesh blood and other bodily fluids in the seawater.

I heard a cry from just behind me and when I looked I could see that Jimmy Lord had been hit and that his twin brother Mickey was trying to look after him. As he tried to dress his brothers wound Mickey was hit I watched as he tried to put his hand up to his neck as blood sprayed out of the wound then he simply went head first over the side into the blue water. I could see a cloud of red on the surface and I made to strip my kit and go over the side after him but Elijah grabbed my arm and said. "No Billy Boy you stay where you are or we will lose another friend." I yelled back at him. "Who died and made you Sergeant eh?" Elijah shook his head and replied. "Don't be silly lad there is nothing you can do but get yourself killed and what good would that do anybody and Mickey

certainly wouldn't want you to do it." He looked me in the eyes as he continued. "Listen lad with the amount of kit he was carrying and the depth of the water he would have had no chance. Anyway the wound to his neck probably killed him outright just look at the blood on the water's surface." I looked at the blood slick on the surface and followed it as it trailed down through the clear clean water to where Mickey had disappeared into the depths. I knew that Elijah was right but it sickened me to think there was nothing we could do for a good mate and a comrade. God this was not what I had dreamed war was about there was neither death nor glory here just scared ordinary blokes like me. There was no fanfare of trumpets and being born away on angel's wings there was just death and destruction, screams of pain filth and blood and men crying for their Mothers. Jimmy was still lying unconscious in the bottom of the boat so for the present he would be spared the news of his twin's death that is if he made it then there was Frank to tell I would write as soon as I could. I put these things to one side as we drew very close to the shore now and the bullets if anything were whining and buzzing round us like angry bee's but with a much deadlier sting.

Looking forward I could see W Beach right in front of us now and what I saw didn't fill me with any confidence whatsoever for it looked to be a complete mess. As I looked I judged the beach to be about 300-400yds wide but only about 30-40yds deep and on either side of the beach there were cliffs that must have been around 150ft in height and completely commanded the beach. A funnel shaped valley lay in the centre and climbed up from the beach reaching the level of the cliffs and this would be the route we would have to take. The beach was covered in barbed wire which was thickly strewn about and machine guns hammered down from the strong points on the cliffs. As our lads made their way ashore mines on the water's edge and on the beach would explode throwing pieces of them into the air. Then bits of body and gore would fall back down onto the sand lying there like meat in some kind of hellish butchers shop display on the beach. The men in the boats just in front of us I could see were being told to jump into the water and wade ashore a lot of them obeyed and dropped over the sides but the water was too deep and the weight of their kit dragged them down drowning them. The ones who did make it to shore fell prey to either the mines machine guns or got entangled in the barbed wire on top of this were the bloody snipers who picked people off with deadly accuracy. The water around this area had turned crimson with the blood of the wounded and dying and the dead were rolling around in the surf but in some places they were that thick as to be jammed together in masses. I watched men with their limbs blown off or trying to hold their entrails in place and stop them falling out and spilling onto the sand I shuddered as I watched this scene and the hair on my head stood on end.

I am glad to say that the sailors in our wave had a bit more sense or luck but we could see on the far left a gap in the wire and our men were getting ashore more easily through this place. The sailors and Fusiliers on the oars pulled like mad and we came up grounding on the sand farther back those that were left jumped into the sea and we started wading ashore as the bullets continued to churn the sea in frenzy. I was wading in waist high water and had just put my foot down when I went head first down into the water I had found a large hole in the seabed and had fell I thought I was going to drown as I struggled with my kits weight thrashing and wallowing under the surface. I wondered if my life would flash before me as people said it did when you drowned when all of a sudden I felt a yank on my pack and my head cleared the surface leaving me coughing and spluttering. I knew I needed to quickly get my breath back so I took a deep breath of air and pushed forward all the way upright whilst Elijah held on to my pack and helped me to stand however both my kit rifle and myself were soaked. As we waded ashore I saw that Elijah had been wounded in the arm so I asked. "When did that happen?" He glanced at the wound and said. "I must have cut myself shaving." I looked at him as though he had grown another head so he continued. "It happened when we went over the side of the boat but it's nothing really it's just a scratch so don't worry yourself", he smiled at me and we carried on up the beach. We had just got to the gap in the wire and we were heading for a point under the cliffs where we could see everyone else had taken shelter as this seemed to be the only place that offered shelter from the whining swarming bullets that were flying around. As we moved onward the bullets moved towards us dancing across the beach and looking

almost beautiful in their precision. But I quickly got a reminder of how deadly they were when I felt a burning sensation in the back of my thigh and I nearly fell to the sand. We started moving up the beach again and we could see a Fusilier sat in the sand looking at the place where his legs had been though all that was left now was strips of flesh and the whiteness of smashed bone. We had to leave him where he was as there was nothing we could do for him I could feel my face changing colour at what we were witnessing which was a living hell. Eventually we made it to the cover under the cliff Elijah said to me. "You've been hit Billy Boy there's blood on the leg of your pants." It seemed like a dream at first but then the pain started and it hurt like hell, Elijah pulled a hanky from his pocket and tied it round the wound and this felt better he stood up saying. "You'll be alright lad it's like mine just a scratch."

I fumbled for my cigarettes and gave one to Elijah we lit up just as CSM Dobby came along and said. "Right there's another overhang further along so make for it and for fuck's sake try to keep your asses under cover we've lost enough men in this fucking charnel house today." He went off chivvying the rest of the men and we took off and managed after a few precarious minutes to reach the next bit of overhang. The CSM joined up with us again and looking at me and Elijah he said. "Wounded eh that's not too bad you're a lot luckier than them poor bastards down there", and he pointed to a line of dead Fusiliers at the edge of the water. Turning back he said. "It's good to see the pair of you but remember what I said and keep your bloody heads down I would like to give you a rest but it's a non starter. As soon as some more make it here we will be pushing on to our next objective so if your rifles have got either sand or water down the barrels clean them now." He looked out to where the machine gun bullets still flew and told us. "For pity's sake watch those fucking machine guns the little bastards have got them emplaced on the cliff tops and that's a perfect firing position to enfilade down on us." Leaving us with these words of wisdom the CSM pushed off to round up more of the Companies survivors ready for the next stage. So having listened to the advise me and Elijah sat down then taking our cleaning kits out we started to give our rifles a good clean for after all our lives depended on them. As I was cleaning my rifle my stomach churned over and I leant over to one side and threw up I suppose it was both fright and nerves that was causing this but I can honestly say that I had never been as scared in my life. I could not believe what had happened to us in such a short time as I looked out at all the dead bodies strewn across the beach not to mention the body parts that hung from the wire or that were clustered together or had been thrown across the sand this whole place really did resemble hell on earth.

A short time later Charlie Slater appeared in our midst with a bandage on his hand he looked at us saying. "Where the fuck did you two get to, one minute I was with you and the next I was by myself and shitting a brick I don't think I've ever been so sacred in my life." Elijah looked up from cleaning his rifle and replied. "Do you think we have nothing better to do with the bullets flying round our bonces than to hang around like a pair of fairground dummies on a shy or don't you think that Billy Boy and I have been shitting it as well?" He spat in disgust as Charlie looked at the pair of us properly spotting our bandages he became quieter and said. "I'm sorry lads I will be alright in a moment I am just in such a blue funk right now." Having just finished cleaning our rifles and making Charlie feel more at home we stood up just in time to receive the order to move onto our next objective. So we girded our loins fixed our bayonets and moved forward each thinking I am sure that his next step would be his last. We started up the ravine that ran to the top of the cliffs and that's when we ran into another Turkish surprise for we could see that they had cut trenches on either side of the ravine. The enfilading fire coming from these was murderous and was cutting what was left of the Company to pieces with casual ease. Now our lads were paying the butchers bill and quite a few laid dead and wounded but not nearly as many as the Fusiliers who it seemed were being decimated. Now as well the Turks were throwing bombs down and two Fusiliers right in front of me took the brunt of these being peppered in shrapnel and their screams will haunt me till my dying day.

As we moved up the ravine ready to take the next trench Lt Walter Cole was killed he had just waved at me and was advancing with his pistol held out in front of him when I saw him jerk and

fall face down into the dirt. Both Elijah and I managed to get over to him and saw the mess the bullets had made in his back they were huge and looked like crimson jelly with white smashed bone mixed in. Elijah turned him over and held him in his lap we could see the small entrance wounds in his chest with blood stains round them it his blood had also trickled down his chin. We looked into his dead glazed eyes with no light left in them and I thought about his mother and father who would be heartbroken when news of his death reached them Elijah laid him carefully back down and closed his eyes. We walked up that sloping valley of death with bullets whizzing and ricocheting all over the place and it was just as we got closer to the top that we lost Charlie Slater. We had just poured a withering fire into a trench on our left knocking it out and bayoneting the Turks who tried to surrender. Charlie was in front of me and turned round towards me to say something or other but I am afraid that he never got the chance. I saw a smile on his face and then his mouth opened just once and I watched as a small hole appeared in the centre of his forehead and an explosion of blood and brains erupted from the back of his head. I watched as puzzlement filled his eyes for a split second and then he fell down on his back I ran over shouting his name but I knew that it was too late and that nothing could be done for old Charlie.

Someone behind us got the sniper who had killed our friend but that was too late I knelt down beside him and smoothed the hair out of his eyes I saw the small black hole and cursed it then I sobbed bitterly. Elijah put his hand on my shoulder and said. "Come on lad there's nothing that we can do for Charlie now leave him we have to look after ourselves." We moved on and as we did so I thought no more dances for you Charlie my son or birthdays and forget Christmas no more walking out with young ladies or holding hands and spooning in the moonlight no more anything and the tears streamed down my face. He had been a good mate Charlie and all this now was getting to much for me I thought to myself what the fuck am I doing here at my age watching my mates get slaughtered I could see no sense in any of it. Elijah's face was set and his eyes shone as he said. "Just you wait I will show these fucking Turks no mercy from now on you can bet on that." I replied I know exactly how you feel but we can't afford to hang around this killing ground we must carry on or we will end up the same way." The time pushed on and so did the rest of us assaulting our objective at Hill 114 and securing it despite the casualties that we had suffered the Turks eventually withdrew abandoning their trenches which we took over.

The Lancashire Fusiliers had secured W Beach and we now set about consolidating the ground that we had took at such cost in case the Turks threw in a counterattack but they never did. A short time after this Captain Melstone arrived at Hill 114 and came to see us we had got mixed in with some Fusiliers and there was only Elijah and I left from our platoon with them. He walked up to us and said. "Hello you two how are you both?" Elijah replied. "Not too bad Sir we can't complain there's worse than us by a long way." The Captain opened his silver cigarette case and handed them round we took one and lit up as he asked. "What about you young Lamb how are you feeling alright?" He looked at the bandage on my leg and I could tell that he was concerned and that was why he was one of the finest officers that we had in the Battalion. I took a drag of my fag blowing smoke out in a plume as I replied. "Like Pte Mack said Sir we can't complain but I can say that I am bloody tired and I could sleep for a week." He smiled saying. "Yes I know what you mean it's been a hard slog and we have lost some good men and friends and I know that things are a bit confused at the moment but we will hopefully find more about what's happening later when we get informed from the Staff. A Lance Corporal from the Fusiliers appeared and said. "We should have a brew going in a couple of minutes Sir if you and your lads would like one?" Captain Melstone replied. "No thank you Corporal we shall be moving on after this smoke we have collected all the men from our Company in a trench on the left and I think my lads here are the last to be found." The Corporal responded by saying, "Very good Sir but if you should change your mind we are round the corner", then having told us this he made his way down the trench to the next set of men. As we followed the Captain we said goodbye to some of the Fusiliers who had been in the attack with us who were good blokes. But it was not long before we were back in the bosom of our Company and CSM Dobby came up to us and said. "Right you two lets get you sorted out get your wounds redressed and if there

is anything bad about them report to the medics if you can find any. Oh yes where's that other reprobate Pte Slater got to I haven't seen him yet?" I looked at the CSM and replied. "Charlie got hit by a sniper Sir I don't think he felt a thing because the sniper hit him dead centre in his forehead. I went over to check him but the whole back of his head had gone some bloke from the Fusiliers got the sniper but that was too late for poor Charlie." I could not believe that I was being so cold about the death of a good friend but I was so fucking bone weary and tired of throwing up that nothing seemed to matter anymore. The CSM took it all in his stride and looking at me and Elijah said. "Yes there are a lot of good lads that have gone this morning and the world will be a worse place without them. Now there's a brew going down the trench so go and get a mug and get those bloody dressings changed before some disease sets in and takes the pair of you", and with this he turned and walked off down the trench.

So far we had managed to set up an enclave around W Beach and hold it but as my eyes started to close I wondered at what cost. I was asleep in seconds but the nightmares soon came to haunt me especially the ones about the landing and my friends getting killed I saw their faces again Mickey Lord Lt Cole Charlie Slater and many more and I walk up in a cold sweat of fear trembling and sick to the stomach again. Elijah came towards me saying. "Here you are Billy Boy a nice mug of Rosie Lee for you", and he shoved a mug into my hand. My head felt like it had been bandaged in cotton wool I looked down the trench and saw other lads who must have felt the same as me. I smacked my chops which tasted as though a cat had shit in them so I took a swig of tea which was hot sweet and strong and the best drink I had ever tasted. I said to Elijah. "How long have I been asleep it must be getting late?" He replied. "Not long about ten minutes at most I had just chance to get our tea and get back when you woke up anyway the Major is going to address us in a moment. As we drank and smoked the Sergeants and Corporals were calling everyone round all apart for the sentries who were on watch for a Turkish attack. Major Danby stood on the back step of the trench and said. "Alright lads I know that you have had a rough time and that everyone's tired but I want to explain as well as I can what's happened and what is going to happen as far as we're concerned. He looked at us stood in the trench with our faces upturned to him and continued. "I know things didn't go exactly to plan the bloody Turks were ready for us and the bloody wire strung below the waterline and across the beach played havoc. We as well as the Fusiliers have lost a lot of good friends and comrades today and there are also a lot of wounded to be seen to.

Looking over the tops of our heads he coughed waited a moment and then went on. "I am extremely proud of you and you should be proud of yourselves and each other our task was to join up with the Munster's, Dubliner's and the other troops on V Beach. It seems however that because of the number of casualties not only to our Company but to the Fusiliers Battalion which has suffered a serious percentage of dead and wounded." He stopped and wiped his face with his hanky before continuing. "Also because the troops on V Beach got badly mauled as well that there is no chance of us joining up with each other as for the objectives of the Dardanelle Forts I think that Krithia will now be our goal and may just be more obtainable. Someone from the back shouted. "We can go on just give us the word Sir", mutters of agreement ran around the trench. The Major smiled at this saying. "Sorry lads but its no longer viable or realistic we will consolidate the areas that we now have and the beachhead. We will then wait for orders all though things are a bit mixed up at the moment that is only to be expected, but when the time comes and we are ready we will push on and give Johnny Turk a bloody nose", this got a half hearted cheer from the lads. Again he looked at us blood smeared and bone weary and said. "Well done lads carry on the good work that you have achieved so far however I must go now and have a word with the higher echelon and try to find out what's going on. I will leave you in the capable hands of Captain Melstone and CSM Dombly who will call the roll", he saluted us and went off with what remained of our Officers in tow. Captain Melstone took the Major's place saying. "Right lads we will try to make this as painless as possible and as quick as we can, Sergeant Major can you call the role please?" CSM Dombly stepped forward and began to call the role the answers started coming some men were dead some missing and some wounded and it was harrowing listening what had happened to them.

CSM Dombay called out the first name. "Private Dawes?" Further down the line a man answered. "Dead Sir he got caught on the wire as we came in I watched him go he was tangled in one of the big piles close to the water. He was dangling on it like a kids puppet and then the machine guns caught him again and he looked like a rag doll with blood all over him, I'm sorry Sir but I couldn't look any more Fred was a friend of mine", he looked away and you could see the tears in his eyes. The CSM coughed and continued. "Does anyone know about Lt Cole?" Elijah answered. "He's dead Sir machine gun got him in the ravine on the way up to the cliffs both myself and Pte Lamb checked him but it was no good he'd had it." The role call went on. "Pte Slater, no that's alright I know about him." Continuing the CSM said. "Pte Lord J?" I answered. "Badly wounded Sir in the boat as we were coming into the beach looked like he took a couple of rounds in the chest." The CSM looked towards Captain Melstone then back at us saying. "Pte Lord M?" Again I replied. "Dead Sir he took a shot to the throat and fell into the water with the weight of his equipment he went straight down." The CSM looked at me with a raised eyebrow and the Captain just cleared his throat the role went on but eventually it was nearly finished there was just one more bit of bad news and that was Sergeant Dawson was missing and all we could hope for was that he turns up safe or wounded.

We had consolidated the trench and cleaned most of the rubbish out of it and the dead Turk bodies that had been left behind. Now the sun came out in earnest and it was stiflingly hot in the trench besides this hardly any of us had any water left and our thirsts were raging. This was not simply a matter of the heat and dust that was now blowing around our mouths burned and had the brassy taste of cordite in them from the rounds we had fired. Corporal Bob Simmons came along and said. "Alright Billy Boy Elijah I need to ask you if you have any water left?" Elijah answered. "Are you taking the piss or what my bottle was empty half way up to these heights and it hasn't refilled itself since then." Bob continued. "Sorry lads but I had to ask Captain Melstone needs to know exactly how much water the Company has left but I must admit up to now our water situation doesn't look to healthy." Elijah now looked a bit abashed about his outburst and said. "Look Bob I am sorry if I bit your head off I know it's not your fault we have no water we are all just a bit tired that's all." Bob replied. "I know that feeling all too well lads and it's alright Elijah can't blame you for what's happening either anyway I must be off on my rounds so cheerio boys and I will no doubt see you later?" He set off down the trench asking others about water and as we watched him go we knew that he was in for some serious ear bashing for his trouble.

The sun was high in the sky now even though it was only just after mid-day it beat down on the trench and us like a hammer on an anvil and crushing people with its force. It was about half an hour later that Sergeant Smith came along and said. "Billy Boy Elijah the CSM and Captain Melstone wants to see you pair likety spit so get a move on." I asked. "What's it all about then Sarge." I hoped that he might cast some light on what was happening as he replied. "I don't really know for sure but I am pretty positive it has something to do with the water situation which is desperate to say the least. But the best way to find out is to get your asses down to the Command Bunker where they will tell you." Elijah stood up fastening his kit and saying to me. "Come on Billy Boy lest go and see what they want us for." I got my kit together and we set off for the Command Bunker further down the trench as we walked I could feel the heat and my tongue was sticking to the roof of my mouth. On reaching the Command Dugout we were met by the CSM and Captain Melstone who had with them about twenty of the lads. The CSM shouted. "Hurry up you two and get over here the Captain has something to say." We made our way to where they stood as the Captain said. "Right lads listen up I don't suppose I need to tell you how bad the water situation is here because I am sure your all as thirsty as I am. I must tell you however that even with the supplies coming up from the beach there will not be enough water for all of us and we must do something to prevent thirst and dehydration." Elijah piped up saying. "You can say that again Sir I am spitting bloody feathers here", this got a laugh from the lads and even the CSM and Captain Melstone smiled. The Captain continued. "Well I think Pte Mack has summed things up nicely and with that in

mind we have been tasked by Brigade to send out a recce patrol and locate a source of water. Now I know things have been quite since the Turks withdrew and up to now we have no sightings of the enemy in the vicinity so let's just hope it stays that way." He started tapping his boot with his swagger stick a little habit he had when speaking he told us. "There is a village about a mile north of our position we will therefore advance towards this cautiously and locate a well or stream which we can use to replenish our supplies. The Fusiliers will be sending out patrols as well however I can't emphasise how important it is that we find water." He looked us all over and the turning to the CSM said. "We move off in ten minutes Sergeant Major let them have a last smoke before we go", and with this he ducked into the Command Bunker.

We had a smoke and then moved off myself and Corporal Kenny had been detailed to bring up the rear keeping an eye out for enemy ambushes from behind us. We had also been told that once we got to the village we should pick out good advantage points for ourselves so we could snipe on the enemy if necessary we two being the best marksmen in the patrol. We marched on the terrain was not too bad there was some farm land and a few rough scrubby places up and down but it was not green and luscious like the land at home. Even so it seemed like the land had been cultivated and looked after we continued on and the sun shone down roasting us like pigs on a spit and all the time our thirst was getting worse. We emerged from a gully and moved on to a flat piece of land just in front of us lay the village if that's what you could call it really there was just a collection of mud brick houses. As we got closer our eyes roved the country sight seeking out places where ambushes might be situated the Captain sent ten of our men forward to recce the village to see if any of the enemy were lurking there. They moved forward cautiously and disappeared between the houses we watched and waited with the flies buzzing round our heads it had only been a short time when Sergeant Ted Wallace appeared across from us and waved us forward. The last ten of us moved up and as we came level with Ted Captain Melstone asked. "What's the situation like in there Sergeant?" Ted replied. "Quite Sir the locals seem to have done a bunk or at least we can find no trace of them and we have searched every house here."

We moved off and joined the rest of the lads in the village I thought some of the villages that we had seen in Egypt were poor but compared to this hovel they were like palaces. A scrawny piebald dog ran across the village street it stopped and barked at us then barred its teeth growling whilst strings of spittle foamed at its mouth we kept it covered as it turned and ran off. Elijah said. "Did you see that mangy looking cur its probably got rabies the bloody Turkish shit hound if I see it again I will shoot it on site and sod the fucking consequences." I picked a vantage point out on the flat roof of a house pointing north where we thought that the Turks might launch a probe against us or even where one of their patrols might emerge from. My rifle had one of the new orthoptic sights fitted to it and I sighted on an olive tree in the distance just to get my eye in. I stopped scanning the terrain for a moment and looked down into the village square where the well was situated. I noticed that Captain Melstone, Sergeant Wallace and a few of the lads were standing round it I watched as Dusty Miller who was a L/cpl in the Company approached them carrying a load of water bottles which the men at the well began to fill. He walked over to where I was looking down and said. "Throw us your water bottle Billy Boy it looks as hot as Hades up there I will get it filled for you there is no point dying of thirst when we have well in front of us." I nodded at Dusty and thanked him I unstrapped my water bottle and threw it down to him he caught it and walked over to the well.

I went back to scanning the terrain for any sign of an attack or patrol activity but there was nothing at all happening I looked out over the flat dusty empty terrain noticing that outside the village the ground looked well cultivated once again I looked back down to see what was happening at the well. I noticed that Sergeant Wallace had removed one of his puttees and had tied one end round his water bottle he then lowered it down the well and waited whilst it filled. He hauled it back up and offered it to the Captain saying. "Here you are Sir have a drink we might as well make the most of it whilst were here Then we can inform Battalion that we have found a source of water close at hand." Captain Melstone took the proffered bottle from the Sergeant and took a deep drink from it which it

looked like he enjoyed while this was going on the rest of the lads round the well had taken their puttees off and were lowering bottles down into it and filling them as fast as they could. Dusty grabbed them as fast as they were filled ready to deliver back to their parched owners he came to me first and tossed the full bottle up I thanked him and opened the stopper taking a long swig of the cool water and it was heaven I sighed in recognition of just how wonderful it tasted.

I heard the Captain shout. "Call the runner up will you Sergeant Wallace and we will let the Battalion know we have found a supply of 'Adams Ale' and they can send the mules with the water cans soonest it will certainly be good news they will appreciate." Pte Jack Martin was sent for he was one of the Companies runners he hot footed it up to the well and saluted saying. "Yes Sir you sent for me?" The Captain turned to him and replied. "Indeed I did Martin I want you to run back to our lines with a message, I have written it out but I want you to remember it anyway. Tell Major Danby that we have found a source of water and that he can inform Battalion. He handed Steve a piece of paper from his notebook then continued. "Tell him that we have encountered no opposition at present but it would be best if a Company was sent up to safe guard the water supply and to stop it falling into enemy hands should they launch an attack. Now can you remember all that I've told you lad?" Steve Martin grinned at the Captain and said. "Of course Sir it's a piece of cake nothing to worry about." The Captain patted him on the back saying. "Good lad be off with you then and don't stop for anything there are a lot of thirsty men back at our lines so go and give them the good news." Steve saluted then turned and ran out of the village back the way we had come heading for the Company.

The Captain now called. "Sergeant Wallace" and Ted doubled over to him. In a raised voice he told Ted what he wanted saying. "We will consolidate our positions here Sergeant I want some more men up on the roofs of the buildings keeping watch all round. Oh yes and let's have some food cooked up although the men will have to eat it at their posts there's nothing else for it. He scanned the village streets as though sensing danger then he continued. "I want everyone to keep a keen eye out because I will admit that I don't like what's happening around here it's just too bloody quite and I can't see the Turks leaving us here for long helping ourselves to their water." Ted replied. "Right you are Sir I will see to it right away and I must admit that I agree with you about the Turks I am amazed they haven't attacked us before now. Maybe though they took more of a mauling this morning then we thought and are lying back now licking their wounds." The Captain nodded mulling this over as Ted Wallace saluted and then left to organise the defences and lookouts as I watched to my front I heard a shout of. "Billy Boy." I stood up and moved to the back edge of the house and looked down saying. "Alright Sarge everything is quite at the moment there has been no movement in my area but I will keep a steady eye on it just in case." The Sergeant replied. "Well done Billy Boy but me and the Captain think that the Turks will be along sooner rather than later so keep your eyes glued to the area. Oh yes and everyone is to have a meal so open your dry rations and tuck in but you will have to eat them whilst you keep watch." He grinned at me and then said. "Oh by the by are you alright for water I hope they didn't forget about you and Corporal Kenny?" I replied. "No I'm fine Sarge Dusty Miller came along and took my canteen and he has been back and filled it twice since then in fact he came back about five minutes before you arrived so I have a full canteen again." He laughed saying. "Good that's champion lad I will nip back and see how you are later but remember you must keep a sharp eye on the area in front of you as we have no idea where then Turks will come from. I am just going now to post men on the other roofs to give us control of the high ground and an all round defence capability as per the Captains orders." I watched as he walked off to carry out his tasks I stood where I was, drinking the water was fine although it gushed out of you like turning on as tap but it also made you want to piss which I did now over the edge of the roof and down to the ground where Ted had just been standing.

I sighed with relief when I had finished I buttoned my trousers and then went back to the front of the building where I sat down looking across the landscape and resting my arm on the small wall that bordered the edges of the roof. Well I thought to myself might as well have some tucker it

would keep my strength and moral up so I reached for my pack and delved inside it for my dry rations. These consisted of Huntley and Palmer biscuits which everyone called dog biscuits because they looked just like them. They had the consistency of iron and I knew many a person who had chipped a tooth or teeth trying to bite into them the best way to eat them without suffering damage to the teeth was to soak them in tea which softened them before you bit into one. I of course had no tea so I poured some water into my mug and left the bloody dog biscuit to soak praying that it would soften the damn thing up before I tried to eat it. While I waited for the softening up process I delved inside my pack again and pulled out a tin of bully beef and a tin of Ticklers jam these were our dry rations. I reached for my clasp knife which was in my pocket and then opened the tin opener from it I then set to opening my bully when I had finished I peeled the lid back and saw what was inside. In the heat which must have been easily a hundred degrees if not more the bully had melted so that instead of having a nice firm chunk of bully I could slice and put onto my biscuit I had a melted grey floating greasy mess in the tin. Never mind I thought and opened my jam which happened to be raspberry but just like the bully the heat had melted it and all I had to show was a sickly sugary goo in the tin. I was so hungry by this time though that I drank the hot bully even though it was like swallowing vomit complete with lumps. I grabbed the dog biscuit from my mug and it had softened to the same consistency as a normal biscuit I dipped it into the melted jam and I must admit it didn't taste half bad. I had a cup of water closed my pack pulled my rifle into my shoulder and took up my vigil once more. I had finished a sweep and looked over towards the other roof tops I saw Elijah on his and he waved at me like a demented seagull flapping its wings I raised my hand in return. Two roofs down I saw Fred Elliot he was stood close to the edge of the building talking to Dust Miller who was probably asking him for his canteen again.

I turned back to scan my area again when a shot rang out I saw Fred Elliot from the corner of my eye pitch forward off the roof and then I heard the thud as he hit the ground. I was quartering my area now with my sight and my breath was coming in shallow heaves whilst my nerves were as tight as a virgin's knicker elastic by the shot. I had just looked over a clump of trees a little to my left when a movement or something caught my eye I had started to traverse back when another shot rang out. I now had the clump of trees in my view and I could see the merest hint of smoke curling up and drifting away. As I looked through my sight I could see on closer inspection a Turkish sniper he was sat hidden up a tree to my left and had not seen me he was too busy looking the other way for a target. I needed nothing more and steadying my breathing I pulled the rifles butt close into my shoulder and sighted on him. I put the tip of the front sight onto his head lined up the shot caressed the trigger like a woman and squeezed off my shot I watched as his head on the far side jetted out a spray of blood and bone that I could see dripping from the trees leaves. The sniper seemed to tumble as though in slow motion from the tree and I could swear that I heard the thud as he hit the ground though I knew he was too far off. I raised my head from the sight thinking that's for Fred and Charlie and all the rest of my mates you have killed today. It never for one minute occurred to me that we might have killed his mates for I was on a crusade now to avenge my friends. I heard someone shout. "Well done young Lamb you nailed the bloody bastard right through the head." I looked across to the roof that a short time before Fred had been guarding and saw Captain Melstone he had been watching the whole thing through his binoculars. I was just about to thank him for his praise when he bawled out. "Look to your front here come some more of the buggers don't let them get the well!" I could see him aiming and firing ever so calmly with a rifle that must have belonged to poor Fred Elliot and that he must have dropped when he was hit.

I faced to my front again and I could see a skirmish line of about thirty Turks advancing towards the village and us leading them in front was a fat Officer wearing a red fez on his head. They had got to about five hundred yards and the fat Turkish Officer was just asking for it he led his men and his gun was stuck out in front of him at the full extent of his arm. I sighted on his chest and watched the fat rolls move like the coils of a python as I watched him push his gun out it reminded me of Lt Cole so I shot him through the chest. I watched as his pistol went spinning as he threw his hands into the air and then he toppled to the ground like a half full sack of nutty slack, another

Officer came forward to take his place but the rest did not look to sure. I sighted on the man who had taken over I did not know his rank and it didn't matter I fired and my shot hit him in the throat and his hands flew to his neck to staunch the flow of blood. However it made little difference and he dropped onto his back whilst his boot heels drummed the ground in a frenzied tattoo of death then he lay still and I knew he was dead. Captain Melstone shouted across. "Bloody hell young Lamb leave some for us you blood thirsty little man." I looked across and saw him grinning at me then he shouted. "Right lads all the men in the village square get up on the roof tops facing the enemy the rest stay where you are and keep an eye out for any surprise enemy flanking attack." Our men began to move up into position and to start occupying the roofs that we were on facing the enemy I looked round and to my surprise Elijah had climbed up onto my roof.

I shouted to him. "What the hell are you doing here you were on the roof of a house on the other side of the village?" He grinned as he replied. "I was but I swapped with one of the others then I could come and look after you, after all someone has to." I gave him a withering look as I replied. "No one needs to look after me I can take care of myself tank you kindly I have made it under my own steam so far." He laughed saying. "Whoa tiger calm yourself or you will bloody explode I am only taking the piss I know your one of the best shots in the battalion and that you have just killed three Turks so stop flapping your gums." I was mollified now and said. "Sorry about that Elijah I am just a bit tired and it is like a fucking oven on this roof I am bloody well roasting." He laughed again as he replied. "Tell me about it I feel like a joint of beef that's been basted in the oven and I will tell you something else if we have to stay here for another hour or so I will be a shrivelled joint and no messing." Before I could say anything Captain Melstone shouted an order and Ted Wallace who was now on the roof with him took it up. "At two hundred yards volley fire, look to your front and wait for it." I reckoned the Turks had about another three yards to go before they started their charge they hit two hundred yards and I could hear the yell starting in their throats to give them courage I watched as their rifles were fetched up and thrust forward in the classic on guard position. Then the Captain roared. "To your front rapid volley fire!" He had timed his order to perfection and we caught the Turks just as they started their charge and cut them to pieces the whole of the line that had charged with the exception of about five were down on the deck. A few of them were squirming trying to hold their guts in while some pulled their self back the way they had come with the aid of the grass tufts leaving trails of blood like garden slugs on the terrain whilst the few who hadn't been hit turned and ran as fast as they could. The Captain shouted once more as he ordered. "Right lads we will fix bayonets and go down and see what's left and if there are any who still want to fight." We climbed down from the roofs and formed a skirmish line before in front of the houses then we marched out of the village and onto the killing field where the enemy had come to grief.

As we approached the bodies we could see the carnage that rapid volley fire using .303 rounds could cause the Turks had been knocked down like a lot of Aunt Sallies at a fairground only they weren't made of wood. They were flesh and blood and our musketry had ripped them to pieces as we came up to them I now saw the full extent of what had happened in their torn and riddled bodies. All this time I had been operating on anger but now as I looked at the blood soaked bodies at my feet and somehow felt a little ashamed though I don't know why after all these were the enemy. The few who were left alive pleaded with us in Turkish but we could not understand them and there was one man shot through the stomach who was crying and screaming fit to break your heart. The Captain turned to Ted Wallace and said. "How many alive do you reckon Sergeant, and of those how many do you reckon will last more than a couple of hours?" He replied. "I make it three Sir and none of them will last for long." He walked over towards the wounded and stopped in front of one saying. "This one here has gone by the look of it the one over there shot in the gut has about an hour if that and he will be in terrible agony the other one I don't think has above quarter of an hour Sir." The Captain looked pensive and then turning to Ted said. "Alright Sergeant take the men on as far as those trees over there and check that the Turks have no more surprises for us and no more of them are in the vicinity and I will take care of things here." Sergeant Wallace turned to as growling. "Come on form the skirmish line again you heard the Officer look lively let's get over to the tree

line.” We started our walk towards the trees just further to our front but then we heard shots behind us and before we could turn round Ted Wallace shouted. “Look to your front and keep moving we have our orders and what is happening behind is no concern of yours”, and he shepherded us on our way.

When we eventually reached the tree line we could find no sign of any more Turks so we stopped and were given permission to take a drink from our bottles and have a smoke. The warm water tasted wonderful as we were parched and as we lit our cigarettes these reached the spot as well calming us and tasting nearly as good as the water. As we relaxed like this a fellow called Arnold Wright who had been a school teacher decided he would complain to Ted Wallace saying. “I think it’s a disgrace that the Captain has stained the honour of our Battalion by shooting wounded enemy prisoners and I shall report it when a more senior Officer arrives.” Ted Wallace spun round towards him and growled. “Tell me with your six months of vast experience in the military would you know about anything you tosser. You listen to me you little fucking turd and the rest of you unblock your ears those Turks back there had very little time left and if you haven’t noticed we have no doctors up here and only one medic who is wounded himself so we have no medical cover. He looked at us to see we understood before continuing. “We have only field dressings with us to use and we have no idea if the Relief Company will get here that is if they get here.” He paused watching us again and then said. “Those enemy wounded were in a great deal of pain more than you will ever know and we have nothing to give them for the pain so you think about that.” He spat on the ground and then ground out his cigarette saying. “I will tell you another thing one of them was gut shot and you lot have no idea how bad that is the pain is terrifying and that Turk had one of the worse I have ever seen the rounds had ripped through his stomach shredding it. He took out his hanky removed his hat and wiped his brow before putting it back on and continuing. “Let me ask you this would it have been better to leave him screaming his lungs out and trying to rip his belly out because the pain is so great. Or is it better to put him out of his misery quickly and with dignity with one quick shot to the head which is the only pain killer we have at the moment?” Every man agreed that what the Captain had done was both honourable and humane and he had been left with little choice given the situation we found ourselves in.

A chastened Arnold Wright said. “Now that you have explained it Sergeant I can see that the correct decision was taken and I am sorry.” Ted Wallace snarled at him. “In future you piece of dung just keep your trap shut when you don’t know the situation. And one more thing don’t you ever let me hear you calling the Captain again he is a gentleman and one of the best Officers we have and don’t you forget it.” Arnolds face went white as the Sergeant pointed his rifle at him and told him. “The next time you question an order or decision I will shoot you myself you little bastard.”

Before things got completely out of hand and Ted carried out his threat Elijah shouted. “Over here Billy Boy it’s the Turk sniper that you bagged and look your shot went right through his temple.” The rest of the lads wandered over and stood around staring at the body of the sniper and clapping me on the back congratulating me on the shot. As I looked down at my enemies body led on the floor I noticed the small hole in this side of his temple But then Ted Wallace pushed the head to the other side with his boot. Studying it now I could see that half of this side had been blown away leaving a ragged wound that had exploded out taking blood brains and skull with it. I was pleased that I had made such a difficult shot but once again looking at the mess my hands trembled a bit and I had to turn away and throw up the little I had in my stomach onto the dusty floor. Ted Wallace stopped his scrutiny of the body and said to me. “Your quite a shot young Billy Boy we will have to call you ‘Dead Eye Dick’ if you keep shooting like this”, and he burst out laughing. Just then the Captain walked up and we went silent as he asked Ted. “What have you got to report then Sergeant?” Ted replied. “The enemy has retreated Sir and there are none but the dead left, I reckon it was probably a recon patrol just to find out where we where and what strength we were in. The men and I have checked the enemy dead and took any papers that might prove useful and we have just been looking at the sniper that Pte Lamb killed it was a hell of a shot Sir right through the left

temple.” The Captain looked down at the dead Turk and the seemed to shrug saying. “I know it was a good shot but I’m afraid that we must get back to the village at once I have just received word that the backup Company have arrived and we must report to them.”

We set back off to the village leaving the dead Turks lying where they fell as we arrived back we found an advance Platoon of Lancashire Fusiliers already established there. As we were stood down a Fusilier Captain came across and tapped his swagger stick against his hat in salute to Captain Melstone saying. “I can see that you and your chaps have been hard at it one of your Corporals informed me that you had some trouble with Johnny Turk. I sent a couple of my scouts up on the roof tops but they saw the dead Turks so I knew you didn’t need a hand.” Captain Melstone smiled and replied. “No we managed quite nicely as it happens this was just a recce probe and not a full scale attack. Besides which we have Pte Lamb here on our side and the Turks didn’t bargain for that.” As the Captain said this he pointed me out I could feel my face start to burn as I blushed furiously like a school girl. The Fusilier Officer looked at me a little disdainfully and said. “What this young lad here why he’s no more than a boy I think you’re pulling my leg?” Captain Melstone replied. “Not in the slightest that boy as you call him shot at least three of the enemy dead that I know of. Two of those were Officers and one a Turkish sniper that he shot through the head at what must have been 400yds to say the least.” The Fusilier Officer looked at me again this time with incredulity saying. “Well done Private with shooting like that you could transfer to the Fusiliers how would you like that?” I came to attention and replied. “Thank you very much Sir and I appreciate the offer but I will stick with my Battalion and my friends. I saluted him and he stared at me with my refusal ringing in his ears and then he shrugged and then took Captain Melstone to one side to discuss something.

As this was happening more and more Fusiliers were piling into the village and the sound of barked out orders reverberated around the place. The Fusilier Officer had now finished talking to Captain Melstone and had ordered a screen of troops to be thrown round the village in case the Turks returned in greater numbers. Now Captain Melstone wanted to talk to us so Sergeant Wallace Shouted. “Come on my lucky lads gather round the Captain and listen up.” So we gathered round in a rough half circle and we were given permission to smoke as the Captain began to speak. “Right lads our work is nearly done here all we need to do now is pay our respects to the Major in charge of the relief Company. We will then wait for the water to be loaded onto the mules and escort them back to our lines the engineers have rigged some hooks which will allow the water cans to be filled quicker.” We had just been dismissed when the rest of the Engineers turned up and with them the Indian Army mule skinnners with their mules as well as the rearguard of the Fusilier Company. The Major in charge came over to Captain Melstone who was stood smoking with us the Fusilier Officer was a tall thin man who stood ramrod straight and had iron grey hair and the most aquiline green eyes that I had ever seen. He took Captain Melstone to one side as we watched the Engineers tying ropes on to the hooks then onto these they tied the water cans that were made from old five gallon paraffin tins. Once these had been filled they would be lifted onto frames that were fitted onto the mules back I was very glad of this otherwise we would have had to carry them and believe you me that would have been back breaking work to say the least.

I heard Elijah shout to the Engineers. “Come on you Sappers get your bloody fingers out we have to escort this water back to our lines and we’d rather do it before dark.” One of the Sappers who had his water can resting on the edge of the well was startled by the shout he jumped and his water can hit the floor losing the water and his hook plummeted down the well and if he had not grabbed the rope he would have lost the lot. He looked across glaring at Elijah but this was like water off a ducks back and all Elijah did was glare back at him. As we watched the Sapper began to recover his hook from the well but all of a sudden he stopped and shouted to his mates. “Give us a hand here will you and look lively.” They rushed across to help him as he turned to the Major and said. “You better come over here Sir and have a look at this.” Captain Melstone went over with the Major as we stood watching like a music hall audience as someone shouted. “He must have caught a

fish typical bloody Sapper.” One of the other lads shouted. “Well if it is then throw it over here and let’s get it cooked”, as the Fusiliers and our lot jeered and laughed. I stared at the straining backs of the Sappers and the thought sprang into my head that if it was a fish then it was a whopper and would feed most of the Company. They were straightening up now as whatever they had hooked came closer to the top edge of the well and all the strain was now on their arms. A long black shape now rested on the edge and the word was flashed round that it was a child’s body wrapped in some cloth or blanket. That was enough for us because we had drank gallons from the well and the thought of a body in it particularly a child’s was enough to have people throwing up where they stood.

Captain Melstone came over to where we stood and said. “Pull yourself together it is not the body of a child as some fucking idiot said I have examined the find along with Major Plum so come with me and take a look.” We followed the Captain back over to the well and I think that most of us were a little afraid even though he had reassured us that it wasn’t a child’s corpse. As we reached it the major was kneeling down next to the package that had been dragged up but now he had laid aside what it was wrapped in. We could now see that it was definitely not a child or even a body because in fact it was a German Maxim machine gun that the Sappers had snagged. Major Plum said. “Take a good look this was wrapped in greased cloth and then sewn into canvas to keep it water tight. It was either done so that the villagers could use it when we had gone or a small section of enemy could infiltrate behind our lines and ambush us from behind.” Captain Melstone tapped it with his stick saying. “It was just good luck for us but bad for them that we needed water so badly and so our patrols got here sooner than the enemy probably thought the ones we killed in the fight probably had been sent to collect it. And no doubt they would also have strengthened the village as a strong point once our troops had passed through leaving us at a disadvantage if we had been pushed back further on because then we would have to fight on two fronts.” Ted Wallace didn’t look so sure and asked. “Surely Sir one machine gun is not much cop I mean alright it could cause a few deaths and casualties but we would eventually over run the place wouldn’t we?” It was Major Plum that answered. “That’s good thinking Sergeant but I personally don’t think that there is just one machine gun in the well we will find more and I would hazard a guess at least another three will be down there.” Captain Melstone followed this up saying. “The Major is probably right and with four Maxims they could turn this village into a fortress a strong point behind our own lines and that would have been bad news so it’s a good job we found the things.” The Major bustled off to chivvy the Engineers into loading the water faster but also to drag the well for anymore guns that were down there.

The Captain told us to get some rest whilst we waited for the water to be loaded and so we moved into the shade and lay out with our packs behind our heads smoking and just taking things easy. Elijah said. “Bloody hell these Turks have no flies on them lad’s I will tell you that for nothing fucking machine guns hidden down a well that is bloody sneaky and could have been dead unlucky for us and the Fusiliers if we hadn’t have found them.” Arnold Wright the school teacher replied. “Yes we have been extremely lucky like the Major and Captain said a strong point in our rear with that amount of fire power would have been disastrous. I should imagine now that they will pass the information onto the Intelligence lot to see what they make of it and I will tell you something else it’s a good job we stopped those Turks earlier on from retrieving them.” Elijah leaned on one elbow and looked at Arnold with derision saying. “Eh up you’ve changed your tune bloody hell it’s you as wanted to have the Captain done for shooting those poor Turks as you put it. You’ve more faces than town hall clock Arnold Wright and if you say another word I will stick my boot so far up your arse you will be able to give it a spit polish.” Arnold lay back down and didn’t say another word because he knew that once Elijah was in this sort of mood you had better tread very carefully.

About an hour later we were roused and told that the mule train was ready to start and that we could be on our way so we took up our positions on either side of it along with a few Fusiliers who were returning back to our lines. We said goodbye to the Sappers who were staying behind to not only make sure that the water kept coming but were going to keep searching the well because the

Major had been right and another machine gun had been pulled out of the water wrapped like the last one. We set off and the Sappers and Fusiliers cheered us on our way as we walked along I got my first good luck at the muleteers from the Indian Army who stood at the head of their mules leading them. They were large men with brown skin and big black bushy beards their teeth flashed white as they smiled or laughed contrasting with their dark skin. They wore proper tropical twill uniforms that were weather beaten and on their heads they had turbans made from the same tropical twill fastened with their own army crests. They spoke to the mules in a soft foreign patter and the mules would flick their large ears backwards and forwards as they listened and you could tell by watching them that both mule and muleteer had a real understanding between them.

It didn't take us long to reach our lines we were challenged and then allowed through the mules and their drivers took the water off to a central point and the Fusiliers went off with them after saying goodbye. Dismissing us the Captain went off to report on the machine guns and we were left to stagger to our own trench weighted down with fatigue. As we reached the trench we were hailed as conquering heroes and it was obvious that the story of the Turkish attack had preceded us. The lads were full of questions asking us what had happened but we told them that we were tired out and needed some rest this did not stop them however from bringing us mugs of tea and giving us fags with the hope we could be persuaded to tell them the story. Our hero status did not last long however as the story of the Sappers finding the machine guns started to make the rounds then they were the heroes not that I was bothered they were welcome to it. Sgt Ted Wallace appeared and said. "Right you fucking heroes before you start getting carried away with your tales of daring do get your rifles cleaned. I will be back in half an hour to inspect them and woe betides any man who presents me with a dirty rifle because his feet will not touch and he will be on field punishment for the duration." With a last look of contempt he moved on down the trench and we could hear him continuing to cause havoc everywhere he went. I had just oiled and put my rifle back together Elijah having finished minutes before but he was not as fastidious as me with his cleaning he handed me a smoke which I lit. I looked up and saw a Fusilier walking down our stretch of trench and I had the strange feeling that I had seen him before but then again I had seen a lot of them since being attached. He stopped in front of me and Elijah looking down at us I noticed that he was really tall and skinny with a shock of red hair and pale skin his watery blue eyes blinked like a semaphore.

He spoke to me saying. "You don't remember me do you?" I must admit that I didn't and for the life of me I couldn't place him but there was something niggling away at the back of my mind telling me that I knew him. He shook his head and said. "I've come to see old Charlie it will be gradley to see his ugly mug again, where is he then have they stuck him on fatigues that would be priceless?" Suddenly I knew who he was and my mind flashed a picture of him and Charlie in the Kings Head I asked. "Its Ted isn't it Ted Smith I met you once in the Kings Head but I couldn't spend much time as I had to go do you remember?" He replied. "Of course I remember you that's why I stopped here to ask about him that day he couldn't stop talking about what a real good bunch of mates he had and how you were one of the best." I turned and was about to introduce Elijah to him when he said. "No don't tell me you'd be Elijah then you fit his description to a tee your one who he said was a best mate as well. Anyway come on tell me where has the lazy shit skived off to I bet he's found the most comfortable billet he always was one to smell things out." Both Elijah and I looked at the ground grasping for some way to tell this gangling enthusiastic lad that his and our mate was dead. I knew that I had to grasp the situation and that I couldn't let Ted keep wittering on about a bloke that was never coming back so I said to him. "Sit down Ted I have something to tell you." He sat down gingerly opposite us but must have known by our faces what had happened and I saw tears spring into his eyes and I felt absolutely awful the tears rolled down his face in a wet clear stream as he said just the one word. "Dead?" I nodded not knowing what else to do as he continued. "How, did it happen, when and where did it happen?" I shook my head I could understand him needing to know but Charlie was our mate as well and had been one of the first to join the Battalion with us. Elijah I could see was hurting the same as me and there was a resigned pained look on his face as he said. "What do you want to know for tell me what good it will do knowing all the grisly

details?" He spat on the floor and continued. "At the end of the day Ted my son the bottom line is he's dead and he won't be coming back like a lot more today and it will do none of us any good to keep going over and over his death."

Ted looked at us and his eyes were haunted and I could see the hurt deep down inside the lad as he said. "I know that a lot of good people have gone today and a lot of my mates amongst them but I had known Charlie since we were toddlers and if I hadn't been in the Fusiliers already I would have joined up with him you see lads in every sense he was my brother." He brought his hands up to cover his face as sobs shook his frame and it was this and the terrible look of hurt in his eyes that persuaded me to tell him what had happened, after all were we not all a band of brothers. I began to speak. "We had made our way off the beach and were advancing up the gully with your lot to attack the trenches at the top. Having just destroyed a trench to our left we carried on upward Charlie was in front of us he stopped and looked back at us down the slope." I licked my lips which were now parched and burning again and then continued. "I thought Charlie was going to shout something to us maybe come on lads I don't know I was looking straight at him as his lips opened I watched as a look of amazement crossed his face just for a split second." I stopped and tears welled in my eyes Elijah passed round his smokes and I could see the raw pain on his face I lit up saying. "There was a small mark appeared dead centre of his forehead and then I watched as half his skull and brains flew out the back of his head and he fell backwards dead. That's all there was to it one of your lads got the sniper but that was too late for old Charlie." Ted looked at us with his blue eyes even bigger now than they had been before he said. "Thanks for telling me I really appreciate it I know how close you lot were and that somehow makes it better I mean knowing that he didn't die alone but amongst friends and that it was quick and he didn't suffer means a lot to me." I looked at him again and thought fucking hell do Elijah and I look as worn out and depressed as this bloke does if so we must look like we had been dug up from the grave and dumped here for god's sake he was only twenty but looked as old as time itself.

He handed his smoke round and we just sat each one of us thinking what had happened today I was thinking about Charlie now and in particular about the time we went back for Christmas leave bloody hell was that only four months ago it seemed now like a hundred years. Anyway I was thinking how he wouldn't let his mother come to the station to wave him off in front of the lads in case she embarrassed him. But no one would have bothered and I bet he regretted it I wonder if it flashed through his mind when he was dying but it didn't matter now still I would bet his mother would never get over it because she would never have the chance to see him off again the poor woman. I tuned back in and could hear someone talking. "We could see the wire on the beach as we rowed in fucking bombardment hadn't touched it and we could see the massive entanglements running into the sea. But what we didn't know until we landed was that they had strung loads of it below the water line and that caught a lot of our lads out." I looked up and saw that it was Ted that was talking and he spoke in a low hoarse voice that was all the more terrible because of the tone of hopelessness that was just below the surface. He continued. "I could see our men falling as they were hit and all because of that bastard wire as we got closer our boats were stitched with bullets they slammed into them and into us and we were that tightly packed in that men died sitting upright because there wasn't room to fall down." As he related this I remembered Mickey Lord and how he had tried to look after his brother Jimmy and how he had gone over the side of the boat and I shivered.

There was no stopping Ted now and he looked up at us saying. "When we touched I jumped over the side and landed in about three feet of water I ploughed my way through it and up to the wire entanglement which was huge. I managed to find a place where the wire was lower and I got through climbing over the bodies of my mates and comrades while the water turned crimson with their blood. He wiped a tear away before saying. "I found a spot of cover and I could hear our lads shouting for wire cutters and warning others to watch out for the mines just at the water's edge near the wire and then those fucking machine guns started up hammering away and chopping our lads to pieces." He

spat on the trench floor and his cheeks were stained with tears as he continued. "The bloody packs we had on weighed a ton and we knelt down to take a breather then the order came to fix bayonets and we started up the cliff on the right hand path. The Turks retreated before us but when we got to the top we paid for it they were waiting for us and poured fire into our ranks I can tell you my unit has lost a lot of men today they are stretched from the beach to the top of the cliff rank after rank of dead men." His voice trailed off and he went quite I think he is a little embarrassed and didn't mean to go on like he did it was just a way to get it off his chest. He stood up and said. "Well lads I had better get back and see what's happening with my lot and once again thanks for explaining what happened to Charlie I appreciate it I really do." We all shook hands and he trotted off to rejoin his mates. After he was gone I felt absolutely shattered and the wound in my leg was burning and hurting like hell night was falling fast and I laid back and closed my eyes to spent to do anything I feel into a disturbed sleep in which images played across the screen of my mind.

I can see Charlie on Christmas Eve enjoying himself clowning around and trying to kiss Rosie who wasn't having any of it and he is laughing. Then the image changes to Charlie appearing as we were cleaning our rifles after the landing and him playing hell because we hadn't waited for him. Then I see him turning round as we move up the gully towards the cliff tops he smiles and opens his mouth to speak and I see the dark mark appear on his forehead. Then the images flash to Lt Walter Cole moving forward with his pistol pointed out in front of him. I know what is going to happen and I desperately try to shout a warning to him but I know as well that I can't and I watch horrified as the machine gun traverses and the bullets stitch across his chest leaving blooms of red against the material. Then I watch as they exit from his back and bits of flesh blood and bone are pushed out in a jet of gore. He falls down in slow motion and I can see the agony on his face as he lands on the ground and lies there with his head to the side and his eyes wide open. They seem to stare straight through me and ask the question why am I lying here and not you. Again the images invade my mind and I can hear old Sgt Dawson shouting I am so happy because this means he must have found his way back to us. In slow motion I move to the far end of the trench and I can hear his voice more clearly now he is shouting. "Can anybody hear me Sergeant Major Captain Melstone, Elijah, Charlie, Billy Boy why doesn't someone answer me?" I reply to him. "Hold on Sarge its Billy Boy I will be with you in a moment just keep on shouting." I listened again and his voice seemed to be coming from a sap that ran off the main trench I turned down it and there at the end propped up against the wall was old Dawson. I was so relieved to see him that I babbled on saying. "It's alright now Sarge I'm here and we will have you fixed up in no time." It was only now when I looked at him proper that I realised that something was wrong and not quite right about the whole thing.

He was propped up against the wall with his legs stretched out in front of him or at least they would have been had they still been there for they ended at the kneecap in tendrils of flesh and smashed bone with bits of uniform mixed in I gasped out loud. I was just about to tell him that I would run and get the medics when I looked up at his face my eyes flew open and must have popped out of my head and my mouth sagged open. The whole of the right side of his head was missing I struggled to take this in for I knew for certain there was no way he could shout for help with half his head blown off. I felt sick to my stomach for I knew that the ravaged husk of a man before my eyes was no living breathing creature but a fiend from hell and I shook my head in disgust. From somewhere deep in the chest of the corpse a voice rumbled saying. "Well if it isn't Billy Boy come to help his old friend Dawson out." A horrible chuckle came from the ravaged lips as he continued. "Guess what your too late you should have come back to look for me when it mattered but you couldn't be bothered off chasing Turkish bints more like." I was about to deny this when he fixed me with the one brown eye he had left in his ravaged face and said. "Spare a thought for old Dawson then there's no one here to keep me company it's so dark sometimes and I get so lonely that's why you're here Billy Boy you can join me for eternity", and his good eye gleamed maliciously. I literally shit myself and I was trembling like a leaf the look of horror on my face must have conveyed something. For when I looked the corpse of Dawson had risen onto its stumps and was dragging itself towards me with its arms wide open as though it wanted a hug. I screamed at it.

“Get the fuck away from me.” I tried to turn and run but my legs wouldn’t work and an icy cold had come from nowhere and I was freezing as I watched in fascination as its ice cold hand caressed my cheek with the touch of the grave and I screamed like a little girl.

There was blackness and then I heard my name being called over and over my eyes snapped open and I saw Elijah bent over me shaking my shoulder and I noticed the concern in his eyes as he said. “Bloody hell you didn’t half give me and most of the other lads a scare you have been shouting and bawling for ages I have been trying to wake you up for ten minutes fuck me it must have been some nightmare.” He handed me a smoke and I lit it thinking that Elijah didn’t know the half of it I took a drag with a trembling hand and then a great sense of calm came over me as I realised that it really had all been a nightmare. I knew that although Charlie and Walter Cole were dead Sgt Dawson could still be alive and trying to make his way back to us he might be attached to another unit and this thought alone bucked me up no end. It was dark now but the dazzling array of stars and the huge full moon were more than enough to see by I stood up stretching and yawning easing the cramp out of my muscles. Elijah said to me. “Come on lets go and pick up some more rations and see if there’s a mug of tea going my moths drier than the pissing Gobi Desert.” We grabbed our kit and went in search of rations and tea but as we walked along tremors wracked my body as I remembered the night mares I had just had and I wondered if they would haunt me for the rest of my days.

Chapter Eight

The day of the 28th of April dawned bright and beautiful we had just been stood down from stand to and we were still talking about the news we had been told yesterday. It came down the chain of command that the Lancashire Fusiliers had won a hat full of medals including six Victoria Crosses which was unbelievable. It made us proud to have been attached to the Battalion but what had us smiling even more was the fact that Captain Melstone had won the Military Cross and CSM Dombly had won a bar to his Military Medal and Sgt Dawson had been awarded the Military Medal as well. This news had boosted our moral no end and we were in a good mood as we sat down to eat breakfast which consisted of that old time favourite bully and biscuits but before we took a bite all hell broke loose. Whistles had started blowing and the Sgt’s and Cpl’s were shouting at us to get over the command dugout for a briefing. When we arrived Major Danby was waiting with a sheaf of papers in his hand standing beside him were CSM Dombly and the Officers that were left of our Company. Me Elijah and Johnny Grundy were stood together we had known Johnny since joining up he was a small dynamo of a man with dark hair that met in a widows peak and hard brown eyes he had a scar that traced a line from the corner of his eye to the corner of his lip. He had got this in a mining accident and it shone an angry red when he was annoyed I liked him no end he was a straight talker and in my book you wouldn’t find a better bloke in the army he was a little older than us being twenty five. Elijah said. “Shit just look at those papers the Majors holding you can bet your life that there full of fatigues and guess whose names on them.” He shook his head in disgust and spat on the floor as Johnny nodded his head in agreement.

The CSM stepped forward and let his gaze travel over us as he said. “Attention stand still, shut up and pin your lugs back and listen to what the O.C. has to say and don’t interrupt.” He turned towards the Major and said. “Right you are Sir the men are ready”, he saluted and stepped back. The O.C. stepped forward saying. “Stand easy men and just bear with me for the moment will you.” He looked down at the papers in his hand and went through them he had read a couple of pages then he looked up and carried on. “There seems to have been some almighty cock up or something for I have just received orders that the Division is going to advance up the peninsula taking first Krithia and

then Achi Baba and from there we will push onto our final objectives.” I took this in thinking bloody hell the whole Division must have landed and I knew that this put the Battalion in a better position than on the first few days but it still didn’t sound all that convincing. Major Danby continued. “Now I wish I could brief you more fully but I am afraid we only received the orders with twenty minutes to spare. In this time I have had to brief the Officers and NCOs and they in turn will brief you when we are on the start line. But now we must really get over there and be ready for the off when the time comes some more good news is that we will be with our old friends the Fusiliers and the 86th Brigade.

We were lined up[on our start line and so were the rest of the troops that had landed on W Beach with us although now in recognition of the sacrifice made taking the place it was called Lancashire Landing. We were deployed in open line waiting for the order to move forward and CSM Dombly was briefing us as we waited. “If you wish you can smoke and while we wait I will try to tell you what is happening or at least as much as I know. The whole of the Division is attacking and we also have the French supporting us we are going to advance up the peninsula and our main task is to take Krithia from the Turks. He coughed and then spat on the floor before carrying on again. “From what I can gather when we get further up the peninsula we will wheel over to our right and this will put us on the easiest route for Krithia and that’s about it you know as much as me now we will be off shortly so keep yourselves ready.” As the CSM finished speaking the first shells of the naval bombardment whistled overhead sounding like a train going by. In fact if you looked up into the sky you could actually see the shells from the big naval guns flying in a curved arc towards the Turkish positions as I looked at my watch I could see that it was exactly 8am. As soon as the bombardment finished the whistles went and we set off on our country ramble with our rifles and bayonets held at high port. At first we moved fast over the terrain with no opposition in sight and this put us in a light hearted mood and we all thought that at last things were going right for us. Johnny Grundy shouted. “Bloody hell lads I haven’t seen a Turk or anything that looks dangerous since we started at this rate we will be able to walk into Krithia without firing a shot.”

The order came to wheel sideways towards the right and that’s when the trouble started the manoeuvre we had just made should have taken our advance up the main spur towards Krithia but in between the spurs was rough terrain that contained gullies and thick bush. This presented a nightmare for us but was ideal for the Turks who had set up their defence there and knew the area well and were hiding out there waiting for us to come on. In this kind of terrain you can get disorientated very quickly to say the least all the terrain looks the same and it is quite easy to double back on yourselves or move in the wrong direction and pretty soon you are hopelessly lost. I heard Elijah shout beside me. “Where the fuck are we, this is a bloody joke didn’t anybody recce this rout before the attack started?” If I had the breath I would have answered no I don’t think they did the whole thing smelled of incompetence but I knew enough about the army to know nobody would admit it. All of a sudden we heard heavy firing coming from over on our right were some of the 86th Brigade lads where but just at that moment we were moving through a gully and so couldn’t pinpoint the direction. I shouted over to Johnny Grundy. “Still think were going to walk into Krithia without firing a shot do you?” He looked over towards me and shook his head violently saying. “This will teach me to open my mouth before the event is over”, and he kicked out at a piece of scrub on the floor. The whole escapade was turning into a shambles the Turks were ambushing some of our lads and then falling back and the terrain in front of us was terrible and because of this the straight sweeping line we had started out with was now a disjointed mess. We could no longer see the unit to our right and our Officers had tried telling the unit on the left that they were moving forward to quickly but to no avail. Our unit moved forward cautiously in the thick scrub our eyes taking in every inch of the landscape watching to see if any enemy were hiding out ready to ambush us. Our units must have been scattered all over the place and a Platoon of Fusiliers bumped into us and nearly got their heads blown off for their trouble.

A Fusilier Lieutenant came up to Major Danby and saluted. "Briggs Sir acting Captain D Company Fusiliers", he dropped his salute as the major said. "Yes alright Captain I saw you at one of the briefings before we landed but the main question is what the hell are you doing in our sector?" The Captain looked quite abashed as he replied. "The thing is Sir we seem to be a bit lost its this damned bush and the gullies the terrain is truly awful and there were no indications of this on the maps I was shown." The Major snorted saying. "Maps the only maps I have seen of this peninsula came from some pre war tourist guide and so had no accuracy what so ever and I truly believe that the devil himself would give this place a wide birth let alone any tourists." The Captain coughed apologetically as he asked. "Do you think it might be possible for me and my chaps to stay with your Company Sir I don't fancy wandering round the country side getting more lost or even ambushed?" The Major thought a moment and then replied. "I think that would be a good idea there is no point in you trying to link up with your Company again because it looks that for the moment communications are nonexistent so the central chain of command no longer control what is happening. I would imagine that there are lots of units like yours that are lost and wandering around in the wrong sectors confused by the ground and the lack of orders." So the Fusiliers got to stay with us and we set off forward to god knows where in this bush personally I just hoped someone had the vaguest idea of where we where and where we were going. We toiled on through the thick bush and gullies and I noticed that some of the bushes down here looked like gorse but with thorns that were a damn sight bigger than any gorse bush I had seen at home and that scratched the hell out of you. Eventually we managed to and I don't know how to find a way out of this devils back garden and to our surprise we found ourselves looking at the forward Turkish trenches guarding Krithia. We had been subject to an ambush or two on the way but we had given these short shrift and they had simply melted away. It seemed like a couple of units had made it here there was a company of Fusiliers that were off to our left there also seemed to be a Company of the Essex Regiment present and a lot of what looked like scratch Companies that had been made up of mixed units. The Platoon that had joined us in the bush now bade us farewell and went off to join the Fusilier Company.

We watched as an Officers conference was called and they all met in a circle by a cedar tree and I should imagine began to weigh up the situation and what was going to happen next. In the mean time and more through luck the Turks hadn't seen us and must have been half asleep the Officers went on talking as others watched the Turk trenches through field glasses and reported back what they were seeing in the Turkish positions. Johnny Grundy said. "I don't like the look of that Officers meeting believe you me when that lot get together chatting like that it can bode no good for the likes of us." His face had the hound dog look of a basset hound that had been kicked in the balls. Elijah replied. "You're probably right Johnny but I have looked at those Turkish trenches over there and I haven't got field glasses but to my eye they look only lightly defended if you ask me". We all looked over at the Turkish trenches as the Officers conference broke up and the Major came back over to us he reached us and said. "Gather round lads and I will fill you in on what's happening it would seem that the Turks for whatever reasons haven't seen us yet and from what we can make out their trenches are only lightly manned and not heavily defended as we were told". He stopped to blow his nose on a large hanky which he then stuffed back into his pocket as he continued. "What we are about to do is fix bayonets and charge the enemy position the surprise and momentum of our charge should carry us through and allow us to capture the positions. So get yourselves ready we start in ten minutes hit them hard and give no quarter we must take these trenches before they can reinforce them so good luck and good hunting", he saluted and turned to his Officers and NCOs and then he walked over to the other senior Officers.

Johnny Grundy spat on the ground and said. "I told you this would happen and that it would bode no good for us and I was right charging fucking trenches with a handful of blokes mark my words no bloody good will come from this escapade and that's a fact." Before we could make any comment on what he had said there was a commotion where the senior Officers were holding their final get together before the off we could see them checking their watches. It was in the middle of

this and everyone else all keyed up that a runner had arrived I have no idea where he has come from but I can see him repeating something to them. Then we watch as he is questioned again and he answers the senior Officers faces are like thunder they turn to the runner again and they gesticulate and point towards the Turkish lines and then they point at us the runner shakes his head but seems to be losing ground in the argument. Just when I think he is about to be murdered he pulls a sheet of paper from his pocket and holds it out Major Danby snatches it and reads it then his head sags and he hands it to the C.O. of the Essex's. He scans it and shakes his head shaking his fists at the sky then he passes it onto the C.O. of the Fusiliers he seems to read it out loud to the rest of the Officers gathered there and we can hear the moans and groans from where we are standing. Major Danby comes back over and gathers us round him saying. "I'm sorry lads but we have just received orders to pull back to our starting positions", and now it was our turn to groan. He continued. "We all feel let down and know that this would be a golden opportunity to take the front line and maybe even Krithia itself but orders are orders and we must obey them." A voice shouted from the back. "What's wrong with attacking then Sir?" Major Danby smiled and replied. "Nothing at all it's just that our communications have broken down and there are units strewn all over the place up and down these infernal gullies and hopelessly lost even more serious a lot have no ammunition left". He looked at us and shook his head saying. "Because of the lack of communication and the roughness of the terrain there doesn't seem to be anyone in overall command issuing the right orders and so Brigade has ordered us back", there was a sick look on the Major's face now as he continued. "The main thing is because of the shambles that has been happening in the bush and gullies we can expect no reinforcements at all and the chances of us holding this sector against a full scale enemy counter attack are nonexistent. That being the case then we must pull back to where we can consolidate our position so we will follow our orders albeit with a heavy heart and set off in five minutes", he left us there and went to speak to the other senior Officers.

So began our nightmare retreat back through the bush and gullies that we had struggled to find our way through in the first place and where we had left a lot of sweat and skin behind. We had a couple of skirmishes on the way back but the size of our mixed unit seemed to deter the Turks from any real attack and besides which we were returning to our start point. We eventually staggered out of the final gully and onto the flat scrub land that we had crossed so easy this morning. We arrived back at our start point exhausted only two days ago we were fighting a battle to get off the beaches and this latest escapade had taken its toll and everyone was worn out and tired beyond endurance. We were told that because of what had happened and the total balls up that had been made the battle had finally been called off an hour ago at 6pm though it mattered little to us and we showed no interest. Men fell down where they stood and lay as if dead on the ground the fatigue finally getting too much for them and only kicks from boots or prods from rifle butts would get them warily to their feet more dead than alive. We were thanked for our efforts and told we had put up a magnificent show and the what we had been waiting for happened and we were dismissed night was falling as we got back to our trench we slumped to the floor in a state of collapse were the cold bit into us and then the rain teemed down.

Trenches had been dug and the new front line was a couple of miles up the Krithia road and although we had only been here six days conditions were bad. Along with the guard duties we had to do and keeping an eye on the Turks there were endless fatigue parties to contend with. W Beach seemed to have turned into a giant stores depot and the tasks of unloading these supplies seemed never ending. Even when we were not unloading we were building the rickety makeshift piers out into the sea for everything had to be transported from the larger ships to the shore in small boats which were a pain in the arse. So all day long and far into the night the fatigue parties slogged at unloading and storing everything that the Division needed be it ammunition or water of whatever it all had to be unloaded and stored by hand. Me Elijah and Johnny were on one of the makeshift piers unloading what Johnny informed us was an old trawler that had just docked. There was an Officer at the end of the pier who turned to us and said. "Listen to me when you pick up a box or whatever and transport it back to the beach to be stored on the way back pick up a rock and fetch it here. Do this

every time you unload and don't worry every fatigue party is doing this and in a short time we will have a proper pier structure here." We started unloading and Johnny said. "Yon Officer is a pillock what the fucks he on about with his bloody stones in a week's time this lot will have collapsed into the sea", we all burst out laughing at the thought of the pier collapsing and disappearing below the waves.

Sometimes it wasn't all bad being on fatigues if any of the boxes smashed we would keep whatever fell out of them and even better than this was that we got the chance to have a swim while we were down here on the beach. The supplies were moved up to the front by mule train and everything was transported this way from the smallest things to the largest. The well we had fought the Turks for in the village was still providing water but we needed a lot more than that and even the other wells that had been found and was still a continuing problem. There was one thing that never failed during the unloading and swimming and that was the Turkish artillery that bombarded the beaches at every chance. We pretty much learned to ignore this and just ducked for cover although if you were swimming you had to duck under the water as the shrapnel burst overhead. When you were under the water you could see the shrapnel as it hit hissing and cooling down as it sank past you in a jig saw of different shapes. There were times when people would get hit and the water would stain red with their blood but it didn't put anyone off as this was one of the few pleasurable pastimes that we had. We had finished our fatigues and it was someone else's turn now so we were back in the front line trenches me Elijah and Johnny who seemed to have attached himself to us. We were sat round a fire that we had built from box wood that we had collected while on fatigues and which we had carried back up to the lines in our packs. There was a billycan of tea boiling over it and the aroma coming from it was tantalising and smelled lovely. Elijah handed the smokes out and Johnny poured the tea into our mugs saying. "Anyone got any idea what date it is?" I accepted a cup of tea from him and took a drag from my smoke as Elijah replied. "It's the 1st of May today for what it's worth bloody hell back home the maypoles will be out and the kids will be dancing round them and enjoying the day with food and pop", and his eyes looks dreamily into the distance I felt sorry for him because I knew how much he missed his wife and kiddies. Me I had made a pact with myself that I would only think of Helen if I couldn't help it or when we finally got out of this shit hole. None of our loved ones memories belonged in a place like this and thinking about them would only drive you to despair and the road to madness. Johnny looked at us abashed and said. "I only wanted to know the date that's all it wasn't because of anything special just an anchor to normality in this hell on earth".

The weather was fine and dry again and the whole of the peninsula was covered in a fine dust that got everywhere and into everything. We started cleaning our rifles for the hundredth time and we had just finished tying rags round the breech to try to keep the dust out when the midday rations arrived. Johnny who had a look of disgust on his face said. "Fucking hell not bully and biscuits again I am sick of this shit the next time we are down the beach I am going fishing a nice piece of fish would go down well." The day was taken up with general fatigues as we transported stores from our rear up to the stores on the line. We finished these and after tea settled back I wrote to Helen and Rosie by candlelight then after our final smoke we got our heads down for the night. I was rudely awakened by a great commotion and shots of. "Stand to grab your rifles come on get the fucking lead out." I staggered to my feet still half asleep thinking what the hell's going on?" Elijah who seemed to be in the same boat shouted. "What the fuck is going on what's happening?" He was trying to stand up but had caught his tunic on a nail jutting out from the side of the trench which now held him back. Johnny watched this and then typically made an understatement saying. "Bloody hell lads I think were in deep shit now and no mistake." We stood on the fire step and looked out into the night we could see red and green signal flares arcing up into the sky and bursting into beautiful patterns that were highlighted against the backdrop of the night. I looked at my watch in the light of the flares and saw it was just after 10pm the Turks had launched a sneak night attack and they had nearly caught us napping. Sgt Ted Wallace was stood behind us commanding our length of trench and he barked out the order saying. "Look to your front and watch for the very flares when they go off pick

your targets and remember to use volley fire were practical and follow my orders.” Johnny remarked. “Why the fuck would anyone want to attack at night for all you do is trip over things you can’t see anything bloody barmy if you ask me.” Ted Wallace replied. “It’s logical when you think about it they get surprise on their side and our ships can’t use their guns for fear of hitting us.” Johnny shook his head saying. “Crafty buggers I forgot about the fleet the big guns are useless no wonder the bastards have attacked now.” Flare burst in the sky and under their magnesium light we could see row upon row of Turkish soldiers coming towards our position with bayonets fixed. More red and green signal flares burst overhead and just as our marker flares burnt out we heard a screaming coming from the front Turkish rank as they began to charge in our direction. Sgt Wallace shouted. “Steady lads look to your front and wait for the next flares to light the landscape then when I give the order pour your fire into them and show no mercy don’t let them reach the trenches.”

The next flares shot up into the sky and burst into brilliant light and we could see the charging Turks clearly now as they rushed towards us shouting something that sounded like Allah Akbar as they reached six hundred yards the machine guns opened up with their hail of death. The Turks were being slaughtered but still they kept coming on as they reached three hundred yards Sgt Wallace gave the order and we poured our volley fire into their ranks. No one could take the amount of punishment that they were and the ground under their feet looked a deeper black and I realised it was blood as we kept on firing the attack stalled and then faded away. Johnny Grundy laughed and said. “That’s the way to do it lads we didn’t half kick their asses then I can tell you.” Ted Wallace shouted. “Look to your front you lot and less of the celebrations the Turks aren’t finished yet and will be back sooner than you think.” The flares burnt out and darkness descended on us once more we stood there shitting ourselves and waiting for the next attack to commence. The ammo carriers appeared and started handing out bandoliers and clips of ammo me and my mates arranged the clips on the trench lip close at hand for reloading. We could hear over on our left a lot of firing going on and see flares shoot into the sky so something was happening. CSM Dombly came along and said. “Listen up lads the Turks have broke through further down the line so keep a keen eye out for any flanking move that might come about. Elijah spat on the floor saying. “Bloody hell I am shitting myself again now not only do we have to watch for them attacking from the front but from the back and sides as well talk about being in the shit.” A short time later the flares whooshed up into the sky again and the Turks charged forward again in line abreast our machine guns caught them again and cut them to ribbons and now in the light of the flares we could see mounds of Turkish dead. The screams and wails from their wounded grated on our nerves and in the stark white light from the flares you could see an arm that had emerged from the pile and was raised to heaven. It was almost as the person was pleading with their god to raise them aloft out of the slaughter that was happening down here on earth.

Shortly an attack was thrown in against the trenches we had lost in the breakthrough and the Turks were thrown back out of them suffering heavy losses. All night long the attack continued and I couldn’t believe how many men the Turks had lost or for that matter that they had any left. Star bombs and signal flares turned the sky into a fireworks display of a huge magnitude and the night was rent with blood curdling screams. But eventually and having suffered major losses the Turkish attack fizzled out and our counter attack chased them back up the Krithia road where we took some new ground. Though the attack had taken its toll on the Division and with no reserves to spare we ended up back in our own trenches where we had started from. For a short while after this things quietened down and it seemed as both we and the Turks were waiting for something to happen and sure enough something did. As we stood to that morning it was the 5th of May and the whole of the 42nd Division (East Lancashire Division) was due to land this news of this had filtered down to us the way these things always did in the army. At first when we heard this we had dismissed it as bullshit but the rumours kept persisting and began to get more credible so that by today we knew they were true and even which beaches they would land on and that was V Beach and our very own W Beach.

We believed it because the Turkish artillery was lashing the beaches firing down from Achi Baba but what really convinced us was that 'Asiatic Annie' was firing her heavy shells at both V and W Beaches. Usually she shelled every beach in turn but today she had concentrated solely on V and W Beaches and the incoming reinforcements which must have left them chewing sand and the shit running down their legs. I had a mate coming in with this lot Sam Langton who came from Heskett village the same as me. I had only seen him once since we left the village and that was in Blackthorn in 1913 after this he had moved to Bury with his parents and we had written on and off ever since. I knew that he had joined the Territorial's and that he seemed to be enjoying it though he didn't go into too much detail. I knew that I couldn't miss recognising him for he was a lad of about nineteen with fair hair and brown eyes and he had an infectious laugh and was good company. I knew that he was with the 42nd Division and that he was with the 1/5th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers and that they were part of the 125th Lancashire Fusilier Brigade so he was sure to be landing today and I hoped to god it went well. We got word later on that the landings were continuing and that casualties had been light and we now heard that the 42nd Division were ready to send some units forward to strengthen our front line. I wondered if Sam might be in one of these units and if so could I see him. If however he was down on W Beach then there was no way I could get to see him at the moment and I would have to wait until the next time we went down there.

The following day we had our own problem the 42nd had landed yesterday the 5th and it was still landing today the 6th we had been called to a morning briefing and we were now waiting for Major Danby to tell us what was going on. He told us to gather round in a half circle and to smoke if we wished before he said. "Right lads this is the big one now that reinforcements have arrived we are going to have another try for Krithia and Achi Baba." He looked us over and I am sure he must have seen the horror registered on our mugs as we all remembered the last assault and the shambles it turned into. The Major continued. "There will be a naval bombardment of the Turkish positions and then we and the Lancashire Fusiliers who landed with us who have now officially been amalgamated into the 88th Brigade will attack our targets in fact let me tell you the whole of the 29th Division will be in the attack." He coughed saying. "We will be following the attacking along 'Fir Tree Spur' and other units will attack along 'Gully Spur' and we will be supported by the French and hopefully this time we will succeed." The Major blew his nose on a large hanky and then returned it to his pocket after examining it as he continued to speak. "The attack will take place at 11am so we will start moving up to the start line now and then we will be in plenty of time should anything untoward happen. I am sorry that we haven't had any more time but Brigade didn't receive the orders until 4am this morning and we didn't get them till 6am so there was little time to brief you before now", and with this we were dismissed to get our kit and move up to the start line.

We were sitting on our kit on the start line having a smoke and talking I looked at the time on my father's watch and saw it was about 10:15am and I can honestly say that moral was not what it should have been. Johnny Grundy was still whinging. "If this is the big show they must be wrong in their heads I will tell you what this is its bloody suicide that's what it is". He flicked the butt end of his cigarette away in a burst of sparks and said. "Wasn't it bad enough last time we went up against Krithia and this time were attacking up bloody 'Fir Tree Spur' that's enough to put the kybosh on anything." I must say that I agreed with Johnny whole heartedly there was no way that I could see this going right and I had a bad feeling about the whole thing. Elijah scratched his ass and said. "I know what you mean Johnny the brass should have waited for the whole of the 42nd to have disembarked and moved up in support before planning something like this and throwing us in", he ground out his smoke under his heel with considerable force. It was now about 10:30am and I was just about to say something myself when the naval bombardment started up and although it was noisy it didn't last long. After it finished the whistles started and blasted out warning us and we set off on our way the first part of the assault was across open farm land which much of Cape Helles consisted of. We moved along and began to move down 'Fir Tree Spur' and then we wound down into one of the gullies that bracketed the spur as we got into it we could see that it would be the same as last time. Trying to attack along these gullies and find a way through them and the thick bush was

leading to units getting mixed up and lost again just as they had done last time. About four hundred yards along the gully we began to come up against the first Turkish outposts and all of a sudden we were deep in the shit again and all hell was breaking loose around us.

As we moved forward we could see the outposts in front of us and we prepared to make a dash for them but before we got anywhere the artillery behind them opened up with shrapnel shells and we had to go to ground to find cover from the murderous hail that met us. I was with Elijah and Johnny and we had been joined by Eli Woods who had played for Blackthorn Rovers football team before the war. Elijah was holding onto his hat for dear life as the enemy shrapnel lashed our positions he lifted his head about a quarter inch off the deck and said. "Bugger this for a lark a man could get injured with all this steel flying around." Eli replied. "You're not wrong mate this is a better defence than I ever faced playing for the Rovers I don't think we will get very far against this." Elijah shouted. "Billy Boy are you alright lad?" I answered. "Yes not so bad just keeping my napper down I know one thing though this is a lot worse than the last time we attacked." Johnny Grundy said. "Your right and I will tell you something else there's every chance that it will get worse I knew no good would come from it they should have waited till the reinforcements were fully up to scratch before we attacked." We all nodded in agreement or at least we nodded as much as we could under the circumstances. Time seemed to drag but I guessed that we had been pinned down for about half an hour now we had tried to squirm our way into the floor to make ourselves smaller and so not so much of a target for the random shrapnel. However it seemed that the barrage was lessening as the gun barrels must have been getting red hot and the shrapnel blizzard became more of a flurry. After a while you seem to get used to the whizzing and buzzing of the pieces of white hot metal don't get me wrong you are still scared and shitting yourself but your senses seem to get numbed and you seem to get a couldn't care less attitude. I don't know why so don't ask me but when you have been pinned down for any length of time you get really pissed off to the point where nothing else matters.

CSM Dobby came crawling into our position such as it was and Sgt Ted Wallace was with him the CSM said. "Alright you lot I know things got a bit hairy there for a moment but it's not so bad now in fact we are going to try to flank this position further over on the left where his artillery doesn't seem to be as well set up as it is here." He lay flat with the Sergeant and us as more shrapnel whizzed overhead. He raised his head again and continued saying. "I want you lads to join our raiding party which will be about twenty strong. We want to be in and out fast and to kill as many of the enemy as we can but remember our first priority is to spike their guns so follow me to the start point." And he crawled away towards our left hand side as we all followed. We seemed to have been crawling forever towards the rear and suddenly much to our relief there was no shrapnel at all and we could stand up and walk which was heaven itself. After a while we wheeled over to our right and met up with the raiding party as Ted Wallace said. "Come on now lads let's get our bayonets fixed you know they don't like cold steel it proper puts the windup them", this brought a laugh from us. However this was soon quietened by the CSM who said. "Shut up you lot the Turks are only about a hundred yards over there", and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in their direction. He continued saying. "Remember in like Flynn get the guns put out of commission and get out no hanging around, right is everyone ready?" We all acknowledged that we were and then we made a final check of our weapons making sure we had a round up the spout and that our bayonets were attached properly and would not fall off at an embarrassing moment. We had dropped our packs and the rest of our equipment and were only attacking in rifle order. Breaking from cover we rushed the forward post yelling like Dervishes the CSM was right and the artillery covering this sector was very light. As we charged on a hidden machine gun started to chatter away and I still don't know how it missed most of us but it did. As another machine gun opened up from the other flank we swerved and started our retreat running back the way we had just come. We reached our start line and waited for the Turks to follow us then we would give them a taste of their own medicine but it was not to be. They were smarter than that and quite content to sit in their strong points protected by their artillery and machine guns and just slaughter us when we charged them. There were three of us left behind dead and four wounded including me a bullet had creased me gouging a furrow out of my shoulder

muscle. The CSM and Ted Wallace had been going round everyone individually and having a chat with them and now it was our turn. I had my tunic and shirt off and Johnny Grundy had poured iodine onto a field dressing and was applying it to the wound on my shoulder as he said. "This might sting a little so hold on", he then proceeded to slap the dressing onto my wound.

I had never felt pain like it and I thought that I might faint for it felt like someone had poured hot coals onto my open wound and tears sprang to my eyes as sweat broke out on my forehead as I bit down on my rifle strap to stop me screaming like a girl. The CSM had just come up and said. "Bloody hell Billy Boy wounded again what's that twice now in less than a fortnight mind you your in better fettle than them poor buggers we left back there. His face was grim as he told me this and I would have agreed with him had I not felt so sick from the iodine treatment I had received from my so called friend Johnny Grundy. He turned to the CSM and told him. "It's just a flesh wound Sir took a nick out of the shoulder muscle he will be right as rain come tomorrow and that's a fact." The CSM nodded his head and replied. "That's good and I'm sorry about the raid we had no idea they had hidden machine guns covering the post we were extremely lucky to get away though we did leave three comrades behind. Anyway we will be returning to the Company in five minutes this raid is a wash out and there is no point in attacking again now they know were here so get yourselves ready for our withdrawal." I got my shirt and tunic back on with a little help from Eli and Elijah and then a very subdued raiding party made its way back to the Company which hadn't moved and still held the same position as when we had left. At about 4pm the order came from Brigade to dig in on the line we now held so the big advance up 'Fir Tree Spur' had gained us about four hundred yards. This was not much to say the least but what must be remembered is that the terrain on Helles favoured the defender massively so we knew that it was going to be hard work to shift him. There was one good bit of news and that was the casualty situation was light as were the losses but you had to wonder how long this would last. We had been informed that the attack would almost certainly begin again in the morning and so we should get some rest while we could so we settled down and ate our rations smoked and talked and finally settled down for the night. As I drifted off I could hear people still talking because after an attack the adrenaline is still swirling round your body and it takes time to settle down. Our sentries kept watch out for any Turkish counter attack but it never materialised because Johnny Turk was quite content to sit behind his defences and wait for us to come and believe you me he wouldn't have long to wait.

The next morning after an even shorter naval bombardment that yesterday if that was possible I timed it at just fifteen minutes we set off to attack the Turkish lines once more at 10am. Once again we ran into the same problems as we had the day before which was no surprise to us as we were sticking to and using the exact same plan as yesterday and just after noon we stalled again. Like last time there was no way we could push on without artillery support which we didn't have and there were problems with the ammo supplies so we were pinned down again. It was about 4:30pm when we watched the 29th Division attack along 'Fir Tree Spur' only to be repulsed like we were by the Turkish defences. The New Zealand Brigade had moved up in support and at dusk we all dug in again maybe two hundred yards from where we had started off from this morning and still no closer to the main body of Turkish troops. Again word come down that we would be continuing the attack tomorrow god help each and every one of us because this was nothing short of madness. We were talking that night and Johnny said. "I know I'm not that bright but it seems to me that if you attack the same position in the same way every time and don't change your plans even when they fail then you are on a hiding to nothing." Both I and Elijah nodded our heads in agreement because it did seem daft to keep on attacking without changing your plans when they didn't work and when you had tried more than once. Eli had just sat down and lit a fag saying. "Have you heard about this new lot that just landed the 125th Brigade?" I bolted upright and shouted at him. "What's happened to them I have a mate serving with that unit." Eli looked me in the eye as he blew smoke out in a plume and replied. "I know and that's why I'm telling you it's all over the trenches what happened to them." I could have cheerfully strangled him and I would have done if he hadn't continued. "They attacked 'Gully Ravine' at 11:30 this morning and it would seem that they got cut to pieces going in

with the Turks machine guns. I heard it was absolute carnage with dead everywhere”, he grimaced as he said this. I prodded him saying. “Come on Eli what else do you know you’re my mate and there’s no need to protect me I would rather hear bad news from you than from a stranger?”

He looked at the ground and took another drag of his fag before he continued. “There’s not much more to tell really I just heard they got pinned down and then one of the Battalions I think it was the 1st/5th Fusiliers charged forward to relieve the situation. They drove the Turks back about four hundred yards which was an achievement in itself and gained their mates some respite they are now dug in and like us waiting to attack again tomorrow and that’s it really.” I thanked Eli for telling me but my heart was in my boots and I hoped that Sam would be alright tomorrow and I prayed that he would keep his head down. That was it and we went to sleep the next morning we were eating our breakfast rations and were ready to attack again and just to add to the fun we were told that the plan would remain the same as it had for the past two days so you could say that we were going nowhere again. This elicited moans and groans from the ranks but these soon quietened down as we were told that the plans had been changed slightly and now it would be the New Zealanders who would be attacking along ‘Fir Tree Spur’ and take Krithia. There were murmurs of joy from our lads as we thought that we would be out of the attack now but this was quashed as we were told that we would be attacking over the same ground as we did yesterday.

The naval bombardment went ahead at 10:15am and was a more intense and heavy one than the previous two at 10:45am the whistles shrilled and we set off across the ground that was now so familiar to us. The further forward we pushed the more we could see that the bombardment had hardly touched the Turkish positions and we were in deep shit again and out on a limb. The Turks were pouring shrapnel and bullets down the gullies and in a bid to outflank them we came out on to the top of the gully as we did so we saw the New Zealand attack start. These brave men from thousands of miles away stormed forward without a sign of fear or concern for their safety only to be cut to pieces by the Turkish shrapnel and machine guns. I heard Captain Melstone say they had been sacrificed like the rest of our troops on the altar of incompetence. We felt sorry for the Kiwis who were now pinned down with nowhere to go with their men still taking casualties and dying for a few yards or ground. By noon the whole frontal attack had stalled once more and with no ground taken hardly the whole thing like the past two days was an absolute shambles a cock up of massive proportions. The final throw of the dice and for that matter order was received by Major Danby and said that at 5:30pm the whole of the line reinforced by four Australian Battalions would fix bayonets and storm Krithia and Achi Baba and breakthrough. Johnny Grundy shouted. “Whose running this fucking asylum they want putting in a straight jacket and that’s the truth”, and he spat disgustedly on the floor to show his contempt. Even the O.C. and the rest of the Officers were shaking their heads at the stupidity of such an order but we were told that the attack would go ahead despite any misgivings an order had been received from the staff and would be carried out.

In the end the attack failed miserably as we couldn’t get anywhere near to our objectives due to the overwhelming superiority of the Turk artillery and machine guns in fact we ended up no further forward than when we started. For a few feet of ground the New Zealanders and Australians were near enough wiped out and one could not help but get a lump in the throat when thinking of these courageous men. After three days of battle and a colossal waste of lives resources and equipment we had gotten nowhere and now the lines stabilised. The trenches were now static and the fight now was relegated to small skirmishes although we gained more land from these than from either of the two big battles put together. We dug our trenches like in France and settled down to this trench warfare although at Helles the trenches were nowhere near as close as what they were at ANZAC but this was only because of the terrain. However I would not be in the trenches for a few days as after the third day of the battle the bullet crease in my shoulder had turned sceptic despite Johnny’s administrations and the poison was in my blood. There was a problem on the peninsula and that was because of the poor diet and the swarms of flies most wounds and open sores wouldn’t heal.

So with a high fever I was stretchered down to W Beach where I could receive treatment and this is where I caught up with my good friend Sam Langton who had been wounded at 'Gully Ravine'.

I came round after being carried down to the beach to find a doctor from the Manchester Regiment examining me he said. "Alright take it easy lad you have a nasty infection in your shoulder but it is nothing that we can't put right we will try to have you fighting fit in no time", he shouted for the orderlies to take me into the medical tent. I was carried inside and laid on to a table there was very little anaesthetic on the peninsular and so I was given rum for the pain and to numb me against what was coming. The doctor started to cut the infected flesh away and swabbed the puss out of the wound then he washed my shoulder out with surgical alcohol and I passed out with the pain for a moment. When I came round he was smearing a substance like grease on my shoulder and then it was dressed and I was carried back outside and laid next to the other wounded soldiers on their stretchers. I looked up at the sky and was more than a bit stiff and sore in my shoulder when I heard a voice from my right say. "Billy Boy is that you lad or am I hallucinating?" I looked over and saw Sam Langton lying on a stretcher and I replied. "Bloody hell Sam it's good to see you I was wondering when I would bump into you and here you are." Looking at him I noticed that his chest was heavily bandaged and blood had seeped through the dressings and to me his wounds looked quite serious but then again I was no medic. He told me. "It was almost worth getting wounded to see you although I had no idea your lot were out here." So I told him what had happened back in Egypt and how we had ended up here in gods little paradise when I finished I asked him how he had ended up here wounded like he was? He replied. "Alright Billy Boy I think I have time before they move me to the hospital ship to tell you what happened."

He began his tale saying. "We landed on W Beach and it took us till well into the afternoon to get the Brigade ashore though most of us were happy to be here and not at sea. What we were not so happy with was the shelling that was raining down on the beaches but to tell the truth we did not receive many casualties from it. By the time the Brigade was ready to move it was dark and this meant we had to march through the night to reach our start point near the head of 'Gully Ravine' and it was 2am in the morning before we arrived there." Sam coughed and I heard a distinct rattle in his throat that concerned me a bit and I told him to stop if he was tired or his wounds were hurting him too much. He said he was alright and continued his story. "Because of some mix up in our orders we did not begin our advance while 11:30pm and our lot the 1st/5th Lanc's were in the vanguard and we had advanced four hundred yards to our first objective before we came upon the Turkish outposts and trenches'." He looked at the sky and then closed his eyes as he said. "There was a lot of really bad bush running up the ravine and the Turks had hidden machine gun posts in it and turned them into strong points. They had cleared fields of fire in front of these and as we advanced and crossed these places all hell let loose and the machine guns opened fire and the bullets whizzed all over the place. Then they fired their shrapnel shells at us and this with the bullets chopped the bush to pieces flinging greenery everywhere and cutting our lads to pieces. He took his hanky out and mopped his brow before carrying on. "The rest of the Brigade was trying to push up towards us but they were being slaughtered were they stood so naval artillery was called in to silence the machine guns but this did no good because the shells could not find them let alone smash them. He led back down on his stretcher saying. "By the end of the day we had dug in where were we where but we never got anywhere near the Turkish positions. I went out to pick up a bloke who had crawled back wounded to our lines as I stopped down to lift him up the Turks fired off a shrapnel shell and I was peppered with the stuff. I looked over at him and I must admit that I was concerned for his wellbeing but he continued with the last bit of his story. "Luckily a couple of stretcher bearers risked their lives to come and get me and the other bloke they brought us back to our trenches only he was dead and I ended up down here. So now you know about my great Helles adventure still never mind I should be between clean sheets soon with a sweet nurse to look after me."

He settled back onto his stretcher and I leant over and gave him a smoke from my cigarette case that Helen had bought me and which he had admired we lit up though the cough that wracked

his body didn't bode well for his future. He had just asked me to tell him about Helen when a medical orderly and a couple of stretcher bearers came over to us we both had labels tied to our button holes but he simply asked. "Which one of you is Pte Langton?" Sam piped up. "That would be me." The orderly looked at him saying. "Right you're for the hospital ship so if you have all your stuff we will carry you down to the boat that will ferry you out to it. So say your goodbyes to your friend and be quick we must get going there are lots more who need moving", and he motioned the stretcher bearers to pick up Sam's stretcher and set off down the beach. Sam held out his good hand and we shook as I said. "You take care Sam lad and make sure you take your time getting better then you won't get sent back to this shit hole", and as I told him this tears streamed down my cheeks. I could see in the dim torch light that Sam was in the same state of me and that tear tracks ran through his grimy cheeks. They set off with him and he said. "You take care Billy Boy and don't let these bastard Turks get you and we will have a drink when were both back in Blighty." The stretcher bearers carried him off into the night and I could just see the silhouette as he began the first part of his journey to the hospital ship. I shouted after him. "God keep you safe Sam mate until we meet again", and then I lay back on my stretcher absolutely spent. I was only kept at the medical post for another few days and then I was deemed fit enough to go back to the front line and so I grabbed my kit and off I trotted.

Life in the front line trenches could be both deadly amusing and heartbreaking all at the same time and the lack of water was chronic and always a problem for we could never seem to get enough. We were sitting in the bottom of the trench when a shout went up. "Waters here come on let's have a hand to unload it come on get off your asses and get your bloody fingers out." Well I will tell you what this was one time when we didn't mind helping out and before you could say general Kitchener the water had been off loaded and the mules were heading back down to the beach for their next load. We filled our water bottles up while we were there and then made our way back to the trench Elijah who was always one for the off chance had filled the billycan up as well and brought it back with him. He said as we got back to the trench. "Right you lot let's get some tea on the go Billy Boy it's your turn to get the wood so off you go and be quick meanwhile Johnny get the tea sack out from where you've hid it". I set off to collect the wood only it wasn't really wood just scrub and bush which was the only stuff we had to burn the fact was though that it didn't burn that well and never seemed to get going properly. I had collected some bush and was next to the track leading back to the rear when I saw thrown on one side of it a busted wooden crate that someone had stashed hoeing to come back for it. Well that was tough shit for them and a good day for us we would chop the crate up with our bayonets and it would last us for ages. If we mixed some of this with some bush we should have had enough fuel to brew up for at least a month. Not only this but we would be able to make Gallipoli pancakes and at the thought of these saliva ran out of the corners of my mouth and I licked my lips in anticipation. The pancakes were made by adding a small amount of flour and water together then you smeared a mess tin lid with either bacon fat or any grease you could get your hands on. Then you placed the mixture on the mess tin lid and placed this over the fire until the pancakes were cooked then you ate these mouth watering treats and the taste of something soft when you were used to eating hard dog biscuits was truly amazing.

When I got back to the trench I was greeted like a hero by Elijah and Johnny who were doing a jig of delight they stopped and Elijah said. "Where the bloody hell did you get it from Billy Boy it will last us months if were careful?" So I told him where I had found it and that someone was probably even now cursing me when they went back to collect it and found it gone we laughed at this. Elijah continued. "We might be able to do a bit of cooking as well as making our brews but first let's get it chopped up and then we can decide. We sat to with a will and had soon reduced the box to splinters looking at the pile of chopped wood we had there was quite a bit but we knew that here on the peninsula you had to be careful as pilfering was rife especially something like wood. So it was Johnny who said. "Were not leaving this around to get pinched we will have to hide it carefully somewhere", we looked down at our pile of wood. Then Elijah found a place in the trench wall that was perfect. "Quick let's get it in here out of the way and before any thieving bastard sets eyes on it."

In the side of the trench wall a hole had been scraped out probably to store someone's kit but it could have been for anything we shoved our precious store of wood into it and then covered it up with loose dirt and shoved a rusty bayonet over the top to mark where it was. It was now summer on the peninsula and everything was covered in a thin layer of white dust that got everywhere and that made our raging thirsts even worse. A new Lieutenant had turned up he had been seconded to us to replace Walter Cole and should have arrived with the 125th Brigade but he had been ill in Egypt which didn't bode well for here. He had just arrived and Captain Melstone was showing him round and the contrast between the Lt and his brand new uniform and the Captain who was dressed like us in a worn out one was evident. They came up to us and the Captain said. "Hello lads this is Lt Smith who has been lent to us by the 1st8th Battalion as a replacement for Lt Cole. He then turned to the Lieutenant saying. "This is Pte Mack, Grundy and Pte Lamb", we saluted him and said hello. All of a sudden Lt Smith wrinkled his nose and said. My god what's that damn awful smell it's revolting?" Elijah smelled at his armpits then at Jonny and me before he replied. "Sorry Sir it could be us you see here water is in very short supply and the usual spit and polish and ablutions go out the window." I mean any idiot could see by our uniforms which were a mish mash of different bits we had scrounged that had been cut down and were now threadbare. I looked at Johnny whose uniform was faded to nearly the same colour as the dust his shirt had no arms left in it and his pants were now a pair of shorts. Johnny had to cut them down when the knees and the bottom of the legs wore out and he had his old campaign hat on with a hanky hanging down from the back to protect his neck from the sun. The rest of us were dressed near enough the same including the Captain the only difference was that I had been lucky and had managed to get hold of an Australian bush hat that kept the sun off me but which was now battered and worn. Because of the dire shortage of water and how precious it was a lot of the lads had either beards or stubble on their faces and the smell of us would have sent a skunk running for cover but such was life here on the peninsula.

The Lieutenant shook his head and was getting quite upset as he said. "No not you lot it is something else it smells over ripe cloying and sticky a revolting terrible stench like rotten meat." We looked at him pityingly and with more than a sense of amazement as Captain Melstone hid a grin saying. "Oh I see I think he must mean the corpse's lads well yes they do tend to pong a bit but you get used to them." I mean the Captain was right we never thought about them anymore unless the wind changed direction or there were fresh corpses rotting out in no man's land it was just one more thing you got used to. Sometimes corpses were left out in front of the trenches and of course in the sort of climate we were in they decomposed very quickly but both sides recognised the health issues that the corpses represented and a truce would be called so they could be policed up and buried. We usually used a old sap trench or the like and just threw them in piles of decomposed and decomposing bodies. We had little time to cover them properly with dirt although we tried but the stench still lingered and the whole peninsula smelled like a charnel house. Johnny said with indifference. "The corpses Sir well we tend not to notice the smell of them now but we used to at first remember lads?" He looked at us and then continued. "We used to see them when they first got shot or blown up and that was alright at first but in this heat after a few hours they would swell up to twice their size. They used to make a noise like an out of tune set of bagpipes and at first we used to shoot them so they would deflate and let the gas out but it didn't work and they just swelled up again so we didn't bother."

The Lieutenants face looked rather green as Elijah took the story up telling him about the burials. "It used to be the god awful trouble to bury them our front parapet is stuffed chocker with the buggers because at one time it was the only place we could put them and they offered a bit of extra protection. Elijah shook his head and laughed saying. "When we took this trench from the Turks it was left piled with their dead so we put them in the parapet wall piled soil on them and moved the trench back a bit too where we are now standing." If anything Lt Smith looked even worse now and his face had gone a pasty white colour as Elijah said to Captain Melstone. "Why don't you take the Lieutenant down the trench and show him our good luck charm Sir", we all burst out laughing at this. The Lieutenant looked confused by this so this time I answered. "At the bottom

of the trench Sir on the way out to the secondary trenches there is an old Turkish body buried in the trench side wall. The only part that is visible is one hand sticking out so on the way up and down the trench the lads shake hands with the Turk and wish him the time of day and this brings good luck on the trench.” Captain Melstone turned to Lt Smith saying. “So now you know what the smell is but never mind if you last long enough you will get used to it like we have.” The Captain burst out laughing and said. “I will show you ‘good luck Johnny’ on the way out and you can shake hands with it because you will need all the luck you can get on the peninsula.” We saluted as the Captain went off with a rather shell shocked Lieutenant in tow as he stumbled in his wake. As I watched I thought we should have told him that like us he will never get the smell of death off him. You cannot wash it off or scrub it away you will carry it forever and the only time you will lose it is when you die and become the smell itself.

Now that the Captain and his pupil had gone we settled down to eat our rations because it was now dinner time. Johnny had already prepared some pancake mix and we used some of our precious wood to make a fire we threw bush on top of this and cooked our pancakes and a billy of tea. We sat back to enjoy our meal when Elijah shouted. “Watch out here they come?” A black cloud of flies appeared from nowhere they swarmed round us and settled onto everything. This happened every day and was really no better at night we were infested with millions upon millions of black flies. We knew they were really there for the corpses which were a real treat and a feast not to be missed I had wrapped my tunic round my head and so had Johnny and these were now just covered in a black mass of flies. Johnny said. “Fucking hell I hate these shit eating flies I would kill every one of the bloody things if I could.” He hit out at them with his hand but this was a complete waste of time all they did was lift up in a black cloud and then settle back down. You have no idea how bad it was where the corpses were buried especially the new ones became a haven for these clouds of flies and as soon as any food was open they would swarm in and settle on it in a black mass. As you tried to eat they would be crawling into your mouth and they would actually cover the food you were trying to eat like a black blanket. They really are a curse of biblical proportions and their constant buzzing is deafening when they are present in such numbers. Elijah said to us. “Quick I’m going to open three cans of apricot jam and throw them down the trench when these shit house flies descend on them shovel your grub down before they get back.” He opened the cans and in seconds they and his hands were covered in a black cloak he threw them down the trench and the flies went after them we gulped our rations down for once not having to share them with a million flies.

A couple of days later Johnny opened a can of bully and said. “Here we go again any second now the greedy black bastards will turn up and cover my food”, he looked around and disgust was written on his face. We all watched and waited for the flies to appear I said. “Sorry Johnny we can’t even use the jam trick anymore as it is getting scarce so if I was you I would shovel it down as quick as I could before the bastards arrive.” Johnny took me at my word and poured it down his throat in record time then he started laughing fit to bust. As he howled he said. “Well I really put one over on them so you could say that there are no flies on me”, and we all burst out laughing with him. Elijah replied. That’s right Johnny but have you noticed there are no flies anywhere I can’t understand it Johnny’s can should have been covered in the black sods and we should have been shooing them away but there’s hardly a one around. I slowly looked round the trench and he was right because apart from a few up and down the trench was oddly fly free. We might have been baffled for ever had we not been talking to Ted Wallace a few days later and he said. It’s down to those Essex lads in the next trench they have found a spare sap trench and are busy filling it with any of our of Turkish corpses. I have been told as how it is just one big mass of crawling buzzing black flies so it would seem they have gone there for a better feed”, and having told us this he turned and walked off laughing. Well we did not care what it was because we had a few days fly free but eventually either they or their relatives turned up again to make our lives miserable but then again the whole peninsula was covered in flies so we were not alone in our suffering.

A few days later we were relieved on the front line and moved back to a rest camp in the rear down on W Beach we marched down and entered the camp. CSM Domby stood in front of us when we halted and said. "Listen up lads when you fall out get some kind of shelter made after all you don't want to be sat out in the sun all day and be cold at night not that you will get much chance", and having said this he fell us out. Elijah picked a good spot not far from where the field kitchen had set up and we dumped our kit and got our entrenching tools out. Then we began to excavate our dug out as Elijah said. "Where's Johnny got to I hope he hasn't gone off to stuff his face?" I didn't know where he was but a short time later he came back carrying a couple of GS spades which he through to us saying. "Here you are lads you will do better with these than with those teaspoons you have been using. The ground was quite good here and it didn't take us long to complete the dugout which we covered with our waterproof groundsheets held down by large stones. Tommy looked on impressed and said. "This is a real home from home lads it's the best place we've had since we landed on this godforsaken peninsular that sheeting's a good idea not only will it keep the rain off but it will act as a sunshade as well during the hottest part of the day", as he informed us of this he placed another large rock on the sheet. I went out and collected some bush which we laid down and used for our beds we could fit all our kit in as well and there was still room to spare. Crawling back outside we stood up and I asked. "What do you want to do now lads we could have a look around I suppose and see who else is here or we could find out if there's a card game going on?" Elijah beamed at this and so did Johnny, Elijah said. "That's a bloody good idea Billy Boy let's start as we mean to go on and peg this first class recreation down with either a game of cards or Crown & Anchor and who knows we might find some alcohol somewhere even if it is rum."

But before we could set off and find a game we were paraded again and told that we would be formed into working parties and not to worry as there would be plenty of work to go round. Eli Woods shouted. "What about our rest and recuperation Sir surely we should be taking things easy having just come out of the line?" The CSM looked at us and the sarcastically said. "Taking things easy is that what you think you deserve well just hold on a minute while I get the hammocks put up then you can have a snooze. Then again maybe you think this is some kind of holiday your on and we should be serving you afternoon tea." His malevolent gaze swept over everyone as he continued. "Listen to me you shirkers you are in the British army and don't you forget it and you will do what we tell you when we tell you." As he said this he stared straight at Eli Woods and then he pointed at him saying. "The only rest you are guaranteed Pte Woods is when your toes have curled up and you are thrown with the rest of the corpses until then you will get on with the fatigues you are given and carry them out quite cheerfully", and with this parting remark he proceeded to hand out the working parties and assignments. The little time we did get off was took up with playing cards or crown & anchor or people would spend time talking together or sleeping but one of the biggest pass times was writing letters home. We would pray that the Germans and our mail service would let our letters from home get through not only to find out what was happening back there but because of the effect that mail had on our moral. The other recreation open to us was bathing we could go down to the sea and have a swim but you had to be careful as the currents around the peninsula were deadly in some places. We had gone down to the beach and were enjoying our swim when a salvo of Turkish artillery shells was fired at us. Eli Woods shouted. "Fuck off you Turkish bastard's cant you even let us swim in peace on our day off." Just as he had said this another salvo crashed into the beach sending shrapnel and erupting sand for yards around. The water we had been swimming in was beginning to get polluted with all kinds of things and we had to swim further and further out to avoid it. As things settled down we began to swum back towards the beach when I heard Johnny exclaim. "What the fuck is this?" He started swimming over towards us as Elijah and I looked over and saw the half rotted corpse of a horse floating in the water. I said. "Come on lads this is shit let's get back on shore before we catch galloping gut rot or worse", and we lengthened our stroke and swum back to shore.

A few days after this we were paraded again only this time we were told that we were returning to the front line and this didn't disappoint us maybe as much as it should. In fact quite a

few of us didn't mind going back up to the line especially if it was quite because you could get used to the front line and there weren't as many fatigues. That was the trouble with the rest areas was that you were always shunted into working parties to do fatigues this and the constant shelling meant that you didn't get that much rest. So like I said in the front line there were working parties but you weren't at it all the time like you were back in the rear so all in all we were resigned to going back up front. When we arrived back at the front line we could see that the Fusiliers had been busy and had taken another set of Turkish trenches pushing us another few yards forward. We settled down in these trenches cleaning them out and making them more comfortable for us to live in. At first light we would stand to this was done because an enemy would pick this time to attack as people vitality and vision are at their lowest ebb so for an hour at first light and an hour at last light we would be stood to. After we had stood down Captain Melstone came round and spoke to us quietly in groups of six saying. "Listen up lads what I am about to relate to you is not just for when you are on sentry duty but for anytime. It would seem that the Turks have been listening in to the talking that is going on in our trenches and they are learning the names of our people. He paused to let this sink in before continuing. "They infiltrate our trench lines and then call the name of a soldier when the person goes to find out who wants him he gets a knife or bayonet in the guts and then the Turks scarper back to their own lines." He mopped his brow with his hanky and said. "Right then you have been warned don't fall for the trick and don't think you will know it's not one of us because they are very good at this type of thing even going as far as using people who once lived in England to fool us", we saluted and he went on to the next group to pass the message. Johnny Grundy with his face set said. "You lot had better watch out because anyone calling my name whose not stood near me will get shot straight away and I won't be asking any questions so you have been warned", and we all burst out laughing as he said this.

We spent the day making barbed wire entanglements we did this in the bottom of the trench making a wooden frame first these were about fourteen feet long and then we would loop barbed wire round them. I watched as Elijah was banging a nail in to join part of the frame together when all of a sudden there was a huge shout of. "Fucking hell you fucking bastard." This was followed by the hammer Elijah was using being thrown at the trench wall and then him proceeding to dance up and down blowing on his thumb which he had just hit with the hammer he then shoved his thumb into his mouth. Johnny, Eli and I were in stitches laughing and we had tears running down our faces and we had to hold our stomach just to stop them aching, such was the merriment we were enjoying. Lieutenant Smith who was with us asked when we had stopped laughing. "Could someone tell me why we are making these frames what is the point of them?" Elijah removed his injured thumb from his mouth and said. "The lines are so close together here and the Turkish machine guns and snipers so close and active that it would be madness to stand out in the open trying to construct elaborate entanglements. He looked at the bruise on his thumb before continuing. "Banging stakes in and then trying to string wire between them would be absolute suicide and whoever tried it wouldn't last more than a few seconds." The Lieutenant nodded saying. "Oh now I see what you mean that's why the frames are made in the trench then very clever", and with this he got up we saluted and he walked off down the trench. Johnny said to us. "What a pillock trust us to get landed with a bloody idiot like him why couldn't they give us someone who had experience?" Elijah replied. "He's alright just a bit green that's all mark my words he will come through when the time comes." Johnny said. "We'll keep him away from me because I don't trust him one bit. It would be just our luck for him to get us all bumped off and he would be the only one left alive so bollocks to him", and with this comment he went back to stringing wire onto the frame.

That night we shoved the frames out onto the top of the parapet and then we followed them we then began to manoeuvre them into position in front of the trench. We had just got them into the right position and were preparing to return to our trench when I was tripped by an old piece of Turkish wire that was sticking out of the ground. I fell backwards and landed in an old entanglement it was then that I found I was well and truly snagged in the wire and couldn't move hardly and even when I did I only got more entangled. This was not the worst of it I had made a hell of a noise when I

fell into the wire as it was full of old bully beef cans that had been thrown into it by our troops. Elijah had made his way over to me and he said sarcastically. "Can't you make a bit more fucking noise because I don't think they heard you in Constantinople?" By now I was beginning to get a bit panicky so I replied to him. "Get me the fuck out of this wire its wrapped round me tighter than a Jock's purse strings." Elijah crawled off but he soon returned carrying a pair of wire cutters and with Johnny Grundy in tow Elijah went to work on the wire but it was hard going as it was thick rusty old stuff. Every time he would cut a strand the bloody bully beef tins would rattle like a load of cow bells. Johnny who was also cutting the wire said to me. "Keep bloody still will you how the hell am I supposed to cut you free when your wriggling like a fucking eel", and he went back to cutting through the wire. However what was only minutes later but seemed like hours the final strand was cut but the tins kept rattling making us jump but eventually we made it back to our own trench without the Turks firing a shot. Eli was waiting for us as we got back in he said. "You lot were bloody lucky there I don't know what the Turks were doing but they must have been asleep. The lads in our trench weren't though and we jumped at the noise you were making it sounded like an ironmongers cart going by with all the rattling and clanging that was going on." I thanked Elijah and Johnny for coming to get me and I explained what had happened and how I had ended up in the wire. We all then agreed that we had been extremely lucky that we had not ended up in a hail of Turkish bullets and on this note we got our heads down on the fire step for the remainder of the night.

Things had been going as well as they could do and we had been back out of the line and down in the rest camp but now we were back in the same trench as we had left before the whole peninsula seemed to be in a static state at the moment which suited us fine. Anyway we were sitting in the bottom of the trench Elijah, Eli, Johnny, Ted Wallace and I making bombs out of jam tins which is what we used on the peninsula. We had a pretty good production line going were each one of us was responsible for a part of the process which we had done loads of times and so it ran like clockwork. First of all Ted put in the explosive charge then he passed the tin to me and I filled it with bits of iron old nails cartridge cases and even stones then I passed it on to Elijah who inserted a fuse into the detonator. Then he would pass it on to Johnny who would crimp the neck of the detonator which held the fuse in Johnny then passed it on to Eli who would push the fuse trough a hole that had been made in the lid and down into the explosive leaving about four inches sticking out the top he would then push the lid on and stack the tin with the others we had made. These would be used later on either on raids or as offensive defensive weapons when you used the bombs you would light the fuse and let it burn for a few seconds and then heave it. I always used a cigarette end to light mine as a naked flame at night was too tempting a target for the Turkish snipers.

Later on in the day Captain Melstone and CSM Dombly came round to see us the Captain gathered us round and said. "Listen lads we have been asked to put a recce patrol on tonight by Brigade the patrol will tell us what Johnny Turk is up to and it would seem from what the CSM has told me you four have volunteered", we saw the grin on the CSMs face as this was revealed to us. We knew better than to complain but we all knew that the same thing had happened again and once more we had been shafted it was nothing unusual whether it be fatigues or anything else we would always get lumbered or so it seemed. The Captain continued saying. "It will be an eight man patrol so you will have some others with you who have no doubt volunteered as well and Lieutenant Smith will lead the raid." Johnny Grundy gasped and said. "Bloody hell were dead we might as well shoot ourselves and save the Turks the bother", and he spat disgustedly on the floor. CSM Dombly growled. "Did you have something to say Grundy or was that just piss and wind that was coming from your lips?" Johnny for once did the sensible thing and kept his gob shut but I could see he was dying to tell the CSM exactly what he thought. The Captain saluted and moved off leaving the CSM to give us the times and drop off point however CSM Dombly said to us. "Now listen lads and you didn't hear this from me but I know that the Lieutenant hasn't been here long and he's still a bit wet but he needs to learn the ropes and that's why I volunteered you lot. I mean who better to look after him and point him in the right direction than men who have been here from the start." This in a roundabout way made sense to us after all we had been here from the beginning and had survived

when thousands of others hadn't. We could grasp the facts and implications but it still rankled us that we had to go as we pondered this Sgt Ted Wallace said. "I would like to volunteer Sir to go on the raid after all someone needs to keep an eye on this lot otherwise they wouldn't get more than ten feet?" The CSM nodded his head and replied. "Thanks Ted I was going to ask you anyway your experience and commonsense approach will aid the Lieutenant greatly and like you said you will be able to keep an eye on these coves as well.

Standing in the trench later on waiting for the off we were dressed just in shirts trousers and boots and carrying only our rifles with spare clips of ammo in our pockets three of the patrol were carrying jam tin bombs and both Lieutenant Smith and Sergeant Wallace were carrying pistols. We had rubbed burnt cork into our skin to blacken it and stop the whiteness showing up in the dark and we had balaclavas on our heads. The Captain had just started his final briefing and we listened avidly as he said. "The priority for this patrol is to find out what the Turks are up to Brigade need to know if they are massing for a serious attack. After you have gathered this information sling in your bombs to give them a scare and get the hell back here I don't want any heroes out there just get the information and get back here in one piece and remember if you fail we will only have to send out another patrol so good luck." I looked at Elijah for comfort and strength before we went out he winked at me saying. "Hellfire with this stuff on our faces we must look like a group of minstrels", and a wide grin split his face. I know that I have said this before but having Elijah with us was worth another Company to our moral. He Eli and Johnny were carrying the bombs in our group while Nobby Clarke me and another lad had the rifles to provide them covering fire when they chucked their bombs.

We crawled through the wire at our start point and then out across no man's land being careful not to put our hands in the remains of the putrefying corpses that were strewn about out here. The smell of these decayed corpses out here was overwhelming and half the time I had to hold my breath to stop throwing up and knew that I would never rid myself of this hellish smell. We had now reached the Turkish wire and it was here that things became dangerous as we moved along it looking for new gaps that had been cut into it this would signify that a major attack was imminent. We find some and when we get back we will pinpoint them in our report we can hear the Turkish sentries talking quietly to one another oblivious to the fact that we are right in front of them. But I knew that in a moment that they would get quite a wakeup call when our bombs were chucked into their trenches. I hear something and pull my rifle into my shoulder ready to fire but I relax as I realise that it is only a sentry coughing our nerves are stretched as tight as a drum and there is no better laxative known to man than being in front of the Turkish trenches. I hear something over on my left and this time I know it is not a sentry coughing it is coming from the direction of our patrol. I crawl over towards the noise and find Lieutenant Smith has got caught in the Turkish wire Ted Wallace is already there as the Lieutenant says. "Leave me here and get the patrol back to our lines Sgt." Me and Nobby Clarke are now covering them with our rifles in case the sentries get nosy as Elijah, Johnny and Eli crawl over. Elijah whispers. "What's wrong have we hit a snag or something?" Then he sees the Lieutenant caught in the wire and says. "Oh fucking hell that's all we need we are bugged now and no mistake" and he looks over at the Turkish trench just in front of us. I tell them that the Lieutenant has told us to leave him behind and get back to our lines Johnny Grundy speaks saying. "Good that's the first sensible thing I have heard tonight so let's not hang about", and he makes to take off. Just then Ted Wallace says. "You wait there Johnny nobody is going anywhere because we are all going back together after carrying out a successful raid so keep quite while I tell you the plan."

Ted Wallace crawls closer to the Lieutenant and said. "Right Sir listen to what I am saying we are going to start cutting the wire now and as soon as you're free get up and fucking run for it I hope you're not injured?" Lieutenant Smith shook his head I looked at the pained expression on his face and knew what he was feeling having been in the same position not long ago. Elijah had handed his bombs over to someone else and he and Ted now began to cut the Lieutenant free the first couple

of snips and the cut wire whipping echoed in the night air. One of the Turkish sentries shouted something and fires in our direction but his shot went wide I fired and mine didn't and I watched him fall back into the trench. From our right hand side came the flash and explosions of two bombs going off and two more snips from Elijah and Ted and the Lieutenant was free. We had been pouring support fire into the trench but now the whole front seemed to be coming to life and very flares were arcing up into the sky casting a bright artificial light over everything. It was time to get out of there and we ran our feet pounding the earth as we ran hell for leather back towards our lines the bombers had flung their final bombs and we had now all caught up with Elijah and Ted who were Helping Lieutenant Smith who despite his denials seemed to have picked up an injury. Both front lines were now awake and it looked like a fireworks display out here in no man's land as the flares whooshed up into the sky and shots came from everywhere. Despite all this we made it back to our lines without any further incident and without losing anyone. We fell into the trench and cigarettes were pushed into our mouths and lit as we gasped for breath on the trench floor then Captain Melstone and CSM Domby came up to greet us the first thing the Captain said was. "What the bloody hell happened over there you were supposed to carry out a clandestine raid for intelligence not start an whole out bloody shooting war." So we told him everything that had happened and Lieutenant Smith thanked us all for staying with him and getting him out of the wire he told the Captain he was alright but he obviously wasn't. The Captain sent him off to the aid station to get leg dressed where it had been creased by a Turkish bullet and ripped by the barbed wire. Ted Wallace then informed the Captain showing him on the trench map where the new gaps were in the Turkish wire so that he could inform Brigade and the Captain went off looking rather pleased. CSM Domby said. "Right you little heroes get off for your well earned sleep but make sure you clean those rifles first and don't you forget oh and by the way well done", and he smiled at us as he dismissed our little band.

There was one bad thing that happened on the night raid that didn't develop while about two weeks after and that is that Lieutenant Smith died from the wound he picked up. There must have been shit or putrefied flesh on the barbs of the wire and when it gouged into him it infected his leg and he contracted first blood poisoning and then gangrene we were told that he tried to fight it even when his leg was amputated but it had gone too far. But if truth be known it didn't really register with us for we had seen too much death here on the peninsula and it was nothing more now than a fact of life. We had grown callous towards it and some even saw it as their friend not only that but the Lieutenant was not a friend of ours really and had not joined up with us in the Battalion and was when it all came down to it an outsider. The bottom line was though that we had become hardened and indifferent to death or even seeing people with the most appalling wounds and that was just another tragedy of this Gallipoli campaign.

We received orders that another attack was planned for the 4th of June and Johnny pretty much summed up our feelings when he said. "Oh gawd not again why don't they just leave it alone and let us and the Turks sit the war out here?" We were informed that this attack would not be a 'shot in the dark' like the others had been and that we would advance about eight miles. The first wave would take the forward Turkish trenches and then hold them while the second wave leap frogged over them and took the reserve trenches and then we would be behind the lines and out onto open ground which would be easy going then. After hearing this pearl of wisdom an ironic jeer went up from the ranks because this information and plan was the same bullshit that we had been fed before and look where that had got us nowhere. We were stood waiting on the start line and we had seen the first bombardment start and it was continuing even now we were informed that there would be a second bombardment following a short time after the first. This would take care of any Turks who manned the trenches again after the first bombardment had finished Elijah said. "One barrage two what does it matter at the end of the day the Turks will be manning their fucking trenches when we go over the top and they will hardly have been touched." We had also been told that when the first barrage finished at 11:20am then the whole of our front line should cheer and this would draw the surviving Turkish troops out onto their fire steps just in time for the second barrage at 11:30am

to slaughter them. We raised a sceptical eyebrow at this information thinking which genius on the staff had thought this one up.

The barrage looked spectacular which they always did but it always ended up the same with little or no damage being done which just goes to show that not all plans are good plans. We set off in the same order as we had the last time we attacked the 29th Division and us with it the 42nd Division using the central route again we heard that the Manchester's had pressed on for about a thousand yards. Our Division was doing well also we had gone forward strongly and had captured about two hundred and fifty prisoners but then as usual things started to go wrong and the line started to stall. It now looked like we as well as the Manchester's were in danger of being isolated without any support and so the only option was to withdraw in good order so that instead of gaining eight miles we had gained about one if we were lucky. Once again the feelings of failure and frustration settled over us and we wondered if we would ever get it right. Not only that but this was another battle that had ended with men killed for a few yards of earth sometimes it was hard to differentiate between who we would sooner kill the Turks or the Staff Officers. There was worst news to come for us however and a lot closer to home when our good friend Eli Woods the footballer contracted dysentery. This disease was the cross everyone had to bear on Gallipoli for it affected all who set foot on the peninsula to one extent or another. Of course we had all been affected by it but in Eli's case it was much more severe and had really infected him. The trouble was that with the corpses rotting all around you and the open latrines and the amount of flies then it was an ideal breeding ground for the disease. Of course it was spread by the bloody flies that would land on your food or on open wounds in dense clouds carrying the disease with them and leaving it with you.

Eli went quickly down the pan we had just come out of the line and were now back in one of the rear rest camps after what they were calling the third battle of Krithia had ended when he started with the disease. As we sat outside our dugout Johnny said. "What's the matter Eli you don't seem your usual cheerful self today?" He replied. "Don't worry Johnny I will be alright it's just a case of the squirts nothing to worry about", and he smiled like he always did but this time there was something different in the smile. Elijah joined in the conversation saying. "Don't forget Eli get plenty of water down you whilst we are here in the rest area you don't want to get dehydrated, and keep your pecker up mate. We set off to do the inevitable fatigues Elijah and Johnny were in front I stopped beside Eli and said. "Just take things easy at first and if you're not feeling up to it tell them and get yourself back to the dugout and rest up." He managed alright at first doing his fatigues but having to rush off all the time but we could see that he was getting worse and that's the trouble with dysentery its progress is very swift. Eventually it gets to the stage were you can't even drink water without it coming out your ass in a kind of slime laced through with blood. Then you keep trying to thrutch things out but there is nothing solid left as you are to weak and dehydrated to eat anything and it is not long after this if it is not stopped that you just shit yourself to death.

Eli was now really in a bad way he was going for a shit about twenty or thirty times a day and he couldn't always make it to the latrine and would have to drop his pants where he stood but it wasn't his fault. Things were bad as well because there was no paper to wipe your ass so grass or other things were used and they could not wash their trousers because of the astute shortage of water on the peninsula. So the conditions for those suffering from dysentery were terrible though everybody on the peninsula had suffered from the disease from one degree or another so understood what was going on. We rallied round our pal and helped him as much as we could we wrapped him in a blanket and Elijah took his trousers which were covered in shit and blood down to the beach were he washed them as best he could in the sea he then dried them and fetched them back. They must have felt a lot better to Eli but Elijah said. "I don't like the look of him he looks like death warmed up." Johnny replied. "Just look how much weight he has lost I think we had better get him down to the M.O. pretty damn quick." So we decided that we would take him down to the medical aid post in about an hour's time. Before we took Eli I went for a walk to chat with some of the other lads and see what was happening I returned to where my lot were gathered round Eli and walked up

to them saying. "Take a look at what I've got here" and I pulled a thick book from behind my back. Johnny's eyes popped out of his head and he asked me. "Where the hell did you get that from you lovely boy?" I gave it to him and he examined it like a nit nurse going through a child's head with her comb. I related to them how I gone off and chatted with the lads and that on my way back here I had passed an Officers dugout and that some Officer had been sat outside reading this book. I told them as I got level someone called him down into the dugout and he left the precious book outside so I swiped it and legged it back here. Elijah patted me on the back saying. "Well done Billy Boy it's nice and thick and soooo luxurious it should be nice and soft on the ass and should last us a fair few wipes. We will keep half for our use and give a half to Eli because his ass must be red raw by now using that grass and other stuff."

When Eli could make it as far as the latrines two of us would have to accompany him just to make sure that he was alright. Because the communal latrines were just pits about ten feet long a yard wide and about five feet deep above the pit was a trestle with a pole resting on it that ran the length of the pit. You would balance on this with your ass hanging over to have a shit this was hard enough when you were fit but impossible if you were crippled by dysentery and it was also deadly. We had heard of at least one person who was suffering horribly from the disease who had gone to the latrines by himself sat on the pole slipped of into the trench and drowned in shit because he was too weak to get out. So we took Eli and held onto him while he used the latrines and when he had finished he used a page from the book to wipe himself with saying to us. "That's beautiful and soft it's a real treat for my ass thank you lads", and when he said this there were tears in his eyes. We had taken Eli to the medics before but now it was really bad and he could now only crawl about so we got hold of a stretcher and loaded him on me and Johnny carried it whilst Elijah held on to Eli as we took him down to the aid station. When we got there this medic took one look at the shit and blood caked on his trousers and went to fetch the doctor. We waited while the doctor examined him then he told us that Eli was an urgent serious case and would be transferred to a hospital ship for shipping back to Egypt. So we knelt beside the stretcher too take our leave of our friend Eli but by this time he was rambling and incoherent and could not recognise us so we left him and went back to the dugout.

On the way back Johnny said. "He will be alright now they will get him out to the hospital ship and away from here the lucky sod." Elijah replied as we strolled along. "Yes he's in good hands now in a month or so we will be having a laugh with him and wondering what the fuss was about." But they were both wrong because we never saw Eli again he died that night from dysentery and was buried overboard from the hospital ship just another casualty of this godforsaken campaign. Of course everyone said how sorry they were about him but they didn't mean it they were just going through the motions. Just like Charlie and the others we had lost it made no difference and neither did it change the fact that they were dead.

It was now the 1st of August and we had been on the peninsula for a little over three months and it didn't really seem a day over three years. It was our turn in the front line again which I must say was nothing new to us as we moved regularly between the front and rest area at the rear. We were sat in the bottom of the trench on the fire step wondering whether or not to make some more jam tin bombs when Major Danby, Captain Melstone and CSM Domby dropped by they walked straight up to where Johnny Eli and I sat talking so we jumped up stood to attention and saluted. Major Danby offered his cigarette case around saying. "Stand easy men and have a smoke", we all took a cigarette and lit up but I knew there was something wrong and that whatever it was it was coming right at us. Major Danby looked straight at me and said. "Now young Lamb I have a job for you should you wish to accept it", and he and the rest of his entourage smiled like a pack of Nile crocodiles. I thought should I wish to accept it there would be no other choice in fact I had already been chosen still I asked. "What's the job Sir if you don't mind me asking?" He replied. "No that's alright the Fusiliers are having rather a lot of trouble in their trench sector with a Turkish sniper. He had killed all their marksmen and is now working his way through the Officers. As he said this a look of distaste crossed his face but he continued. "So they would like to borrow you for a while to

have a go at him that's if you would like the job. It seems their new OC who has just been made up to Major knows all about your prowess with a rifle and has asked for you," What he had just said left me completely mystified because to my memory I didn't know any Fusilier Captains or Majors. On the other hand was the question did I really want to do what they asked and the answer was yes I did to have a chance against one of their best snipers was to good a chance to turn down.

I looked at the Major and said. "Alright Sir I will do it", and I felt a shiver of excitement run through my body I just hoped it wasn't showing in my face. The Major replied. "Well done young Lamb that's the spirit well you had better get your kit together and head over to the Fusiliers sector and take these two coved with you to act as gun bearers", and he and the rest of his entourage smiled at us and walked off. We packed our kit and just before we left Ted Wallace came to see us and he was carrying something wrapped in a blanket he handed it me and I unwrapped it. I looked at the rifle in front of me with reverence it was a German Mauser a 7.92mm weapon that held five rounds in its magazine and was a bolt action like ours it weighed about nine and half pounds. Fixed on top of it was a Kahle 4X81 telescopic sight I looked through it seeing the recticle and lining it up further down the trench. I left the rest of them and went further towards the rear were I could find a place to test the sight luckily Ted had fetched quite few clips for the Mauser and I was able to adjust the sights to fit me. I went back to our trench and Ted said. "Do you like your new present then Billy Boy?" I replied. "I really do Ted it's the bees knees where did you get it from?" He lit a cigarette saying. "It was taken from a dead Turkish sniper and I just happened to get my hands on it I have been waiting for a chance like this to come along so when I knew you were going hunting this Turkish sniper I decided that you might as well have it." I didn't know what to say properly but I thanked him warmly for his present and then we all shook hands with him and set off on our hunting trip.

We got to the Fusiliers trench and a Lieutenant told us to just stand easy and wait a minute and he ducked his head into a dugout shouting. "The marksman from the Pal's Company is here Sir." Other people heard this and began to gather behind us and as the blanket that covered the dugout entrance was pushed back quite a crowd had gathered. Then a Sergeant shouted. "Alright you lot there's nothing that concerns you here anyone who has no business here get lost", after he said this most of the crowd disappeared. We watched as the Fusiliers C.O. stepped from the dugout I saw his face and recognised him as the Captain who had relieved us at the village when we found the water during our early days on the peninsula. He had now been made up to a Major and he smiled as the others and I saluted him as he said. "So you accepted I am so pleased as we can certainly use your talents round here." He told us to stand at ease and shouted. "Sgt Barnes over here if you please", and a thick set Sgt with dark hair and eyes and sprouting a gravy dipper moustache came over at the double. The Major said. "If you would Sgt please brief Pte Lamb and his friends on the little problem we have over here." Then he turned to me saying. "I have to go on my inspection rounds at the moment but Sgt Barnes is more than capable of briefing you and I will catch up with you later on", we saluted and he went off to do his rounds. Sgt Barnes said. "Right lads over here and I will explain what's happening which is all pretty straight forward." He went on to tell us that every morning at first light and every evening at last light this Turkish sniper would be active and would shoot someone an Officer if he could a Sergeant at second best or failing this the bomb makers other marksmen and even the medics. He then went on to show us where they thought the sniper was firing from but the position he showed me didn't seem a likely one. So I turned to him and said. "No that's not the place I will look for the best places that I would use if I was in his position and my two mates will help me." So the lads and I went off scoping the places that I picked out and there were really only two that were any good and only one of those that would give you a really good shot on target. That night the Major had a word with us about how we were doing and what had happened since we had last met and finally how I proposed to go about things tomorrow so I filled him in and he seemed pleased. We then left the command dugout and had our supper then we had a final smoke before turning in for the night the better to be ready for Johnny Turk in the morning.

The next morning Elijah Johnny and I were up before stand to and in the position that I had picked yesterday I said to Johnny. "Pass me the rifle you have been carrying around" and he undid the blanket that was wrapped round the Mauser and passed it to me. I padded the blanket up and used it to rest the rifle on we were in a small stand of bush at right angles to where I thought the sniper would appear. I took a clip of ammo from Johnny and loaded it into the box magazine then settled down to wait with Johnny at the back of me in a small hollow and Elijah at my side with a pair of field glasses. I said to Elijah. "Be careful with those don't let the sun catch them when it rises or the glint will give us away and from what I've heard of this bloke he wont need anymore help. So we waited as dawn broke and the sun began to poke its rim up above the earth we could here stand to being called and I now had my rifle in my shoulder and was watching the position I had picked out. Then I saw him he was well camouflaged but I had spotted him moving his rifle up into the shooting position I rested the recticle on his temple saying to Elijah. "Very carefully look towards our trenches and see if you can see an Officer anywhere in sight", he did as I told him and very shortly replied. "Yes there is a Lieutenant stood on the fire step looking out with field glasses at the Turkish positions his heads above the parapet like a fairground 'Aunt Sally' the fucking idiot." I watched the Turkish sniper as he now traversed the rest of the trench with his scope probably looking to see if he could find a more senior target. I rested my rifle and said to Elijah. "He will be a dead Lieutenant in a moment if he doesn't watch out." Johnny whispered from behind. "Have you spotted the bugger yet where the fuck is he?" I replied. "Where I said he would be large as life and wearing more foliage than a bloody May Day Queen, it was hard for me to spot him at first now do quieten down and let me concentrate."

I positioned my rifle again and thought to myself that he had probably sighted on the foolish Lieutenant again and I was right. He had found no better target and so had zeroed in on the Lieutenant again and I could see that he would take his shot very soon by the stillness and concentration that he showed. I brought the recticle onto his temple again and sighted in I held my breath and squeezed the trigger the butt gave me a small kick in the shoulder and I watched my bullet strike home. Through the scope which was very good I saw the blood bone and brain exit from the other side of the snipers head and he rolled onto his side. I could hear a great cheer go up from the Fusiliers trench and Elijah and Johnny patted me on the back and congratulated me I told them to wait there and I crawled over the ground between us and the dead Turkish sniper. I got to his hide and saw that he was a small man with pockmarked skin and very black hair his dark eyes were wide open but registered nothing I could only see the small hole where the bullet had struck. Most of the damage was on the side he had rolled onto I took his rifle which was like mine only had a different make of scope on it that was not as good as mine and going back picking the lads up I told Johnny to rewrap my rifle in the blanket for now and that I would clean it as soon as we got back to the Fusiliers trench. When we got back to the trench the O.C. Major Myers congratulated me thanking me most warmly as did most of the rest of the men including the Lieutenant who had been told just how close he had come to death without him even knowing it. I cleaned my rifle and then we returned to our own sector with the Fusiliers thanks ringing in our ears when we got there more congratulations were heaped on us and I was told how proud the Company and Battalion were of me. Major Danby informed me that I could be recommended for a medal and that would be just the thing for when I walked along back home with all the young girls making eyes at me and I would be a hero of the town. None of this mattered to me all I wanted to do was survive this hell hole long enough to be able to get back home to the people I loved and who loved me. The fact of the matter was that I was bone weary with a tiredness that was numbing and apathetic. There was one thing at least now and that was I did not throw up every time one of my shots killed someone or I looked at piles of corpses for the peninsula had hardened me to death and robbed me of my innocence.

On the 5th of August we were gathered together again for another briefing and were told that we had to attack the Turkish defences yet again Major Danby said to us. "Just remember the old maxim men 'Ours not to reason why ours just to do or die' we will be attacking tomorrow and because of the shortage of ammunition will take place in two parts. The 88th Brigade of the 29th

Division and that includes our Company will attack up the left flank then the day after on the 7th August two Brigades of the 42nd Division will attack up the right flank. We stood in the reserve trenches as our Company had been designated in the second wave and as we looked foreword we could see the first wave of the 88th Brigade stood in the front line trenches waiting and at 2:20pm our artillery bombardment began. Johnny said. "I wouldn't like to be on the receiving end of that little lot", and he was right for this was the best barrage we had seen so far. But within minutes the Turkish artillery responded with heavy shrapnel and we could hear it pinging and rattling like hailstone on the front trenches were the casualties and dead had began to pile up before a single man had started advancing towards the Turkish lines. We were wearing metal discs on our packs some Staff Officers brilliant idea for keeping tabs on us during the attack all I knew was that they were heavy and made the packs on your back sag. It was Elijah who spoke for us all when he said. "What the hell are we doing with these things on our backs at least on the front they might protect you from shrapnel or bullets." Then at three thirty the first wave finally surged forward the day was hot and windless and at first things were going well and the first wave had started to take the forward Turkish trenches. But within a matter of minutes the Turkish machine guns and shrapnel had turned the trenches into an hell on earth piled high with dead and wounded. And back at our lines our reserve trenches were also chocked with dead and wounded from the Turkish artillery barrage.

Finally it was our turn we thought that they might have called the attack off but we should have known better because they didn't know how to cancel an attack. Elijah looked at the dead and dying around us and said. "This is bad lads I don't think we stand a cat in hells chance of surviving this little party", and I could see the horror etched on his face. Johnny nodded his head in agreement as he replied. "I'm afraid your right mate we have definitely drawn the short straw on this one and I will tell you one thing fuck all the Staff bastards for sacrificing us for nothing." Just before we jumped off CSM Domby and Sgt Ted Wallace came round to see us and we knew it was going to be bad as soon as they shook hands with us all and wished us good luck. Then the whistles blew and we advanced over the open ground and passed over the top of the Turkish front line trenches leapfrogging on we again hit open ground. It was now that we walked into a storm of shrapnel and machine gun bullets I could see mates of mine dropping on all sides and we hadn't gone more than a few yards over the ground in front of us and we were already being decimated. But there was no respite and we pushed on I watched as Johnny Grundy jerked as bullets stitched a pattern in blood across the front of his shirt and then he dropped to the ground. I couldn't stop and knew there was nothing I could do for him as I walked forward with tears in my eyes and a heavy heart as the shrapnel pattered around us like hard peas being poured into a pan. I saw Elijah throw his hands up to his face and then fall forward onto his face on the ground and I saw the scream on his lips before he dropped but I couldn't hear him for the noise that as going on. But I instinctively knew that he was badly injured I shouted his name or at least I think I did but then I felt a red hot pain in my groin arm chest and leg and everything went black. I came to and opened my eyes I was led on the ground and now I was looking up into the blazing sun I don't know how long I was unconscious but my mouth was parched and I was nearly mad with thirst. I got the feeling that the attack had stalled and as I glanced to my right and left I saw the piles of dead and understood why this had happened.

I checked my body out with my hands first my groin were I checked that my manhood was still in one piece and might glad I was to find out it hadn't been touched. I felt the rest of the places where I had been hit and found out some of these were small holes made by shrapnel the one in my groin was quite large though and I could feel the hard lump of a large piece of shrapnel in there. I had blood on my hands from the wounds but I shrugged out of my pack with its stupid metal disc on the back and felt a lot better I could hear the other wounded begging for water and I knew how they felt. Then the artillery and machine guns started up again and I thought god they can't be sending another wave forward into this but they did the murdering bastards. Tears streamed down my face but I was not crying for myself but because of the waste of good men I looked once again at the dead and wounded on either side of me and I asked myself the question was it worth it for a few yards of ground? There were no more waves coming now and that was because the 88th Brigade had ceased to

exist it had been destroyed in this madness along with our Company. I waited until dark and then crawled across to where I had seen Elijah drop down he was still lying there when I got up to him and he croaked. "Who's there please have you got any water mate cause I can't seem to wet my lips", he raised his hands feeling out. Then he continued speaking. "I'm sorry mate I can't see who you are there's something wrong with my eyes", and his hands felt out again trying to make contact. I grabbed his hands and with tears in my eyes said. "It's me Elijah Billy Boy, give me a minute and I will get you out of here." I disengaged myself and scrambled amongst the dead and managed to find a couple of water bottles that were half full I drank mine down in one and although it was warm and tasted stale nothing ever tasted as good.

I got back to Elijah and held the bottle to his lips while he drank like a parched camel he said. "Thank you Billy Boy, are you injured as well tell me where we are I can't see?" I replied. "Listen mate were not far from the Turkish trenches so we have to get out of here before the sun comes up again. If I lead you do you think you can make it back to our lines its not that far and we really can't stay here?" He whispered in my ear. "You lead mate and I will follow you oh and by the way have you seen Johnny Grundy?" I didn't want to say anything about Johnny at the moment so I just said. "Are you ready mate let's go", and we set off at quite a pace bent double and heading for trenches. We very nearly made it in one piece but then Elijah tripped over a corpse just in front of our positions and he shouted out in surprise. We were challenged from our lines and so I replied. "Wounded survivors from the 88th Brigade were coming in." The Turks heard us as well and opened up with a machine gun I felt a thump in my thigh and one in my shoulder like someone had punched me and then I was face down in the scrub and the pain and burning started. I passed out but before I did I saw Elijah drop down and I knew he had been hit I didn't see the stretcher bearers who came out and picked me up when the firing died down. Neither did I remember being taken down to the beach on the mule drawn ambulance with Elijah lying beside me I came too once in the dressing station when a doctor was examining me. But as he probed and poked I blacked out again so I missed being ferried out and hoisted onto the hospital ship in fact the next time I came round they had operated on me and I saw a beautiful face looking down at me.

PART THREE

Wounded August 1915 December 1915

Chapter Nine

The beautiful face hovering before my eyes said something but no sound reached my ears and all I could do was smile like a drooling idiot at the angel who looked down at me with such concern. I willed myself to say something before this dream apparition disappeared like so many more before it. I tried to focus more on what the face looked like but it was beyond my strength but the bright light that burned behind this angel like a halo had me convinced that I was in heaven and I wanted to see my parents and friends. But my eyes were shutting and no matter how hard I fought to keep them open I was losing the battle I made one last desperate try but I lost and the shutters came down plunging me into darkness and despair. The next time I opened my eyes there was no angel standing there but I knew that I wasn't in heaven because my hearing had returned and I could hear the screams and the moaning of the other wounded around me and it was like taking a trip to the furthest reaches of hell. I could not sit up so I glanced over to my right and looked at the figure that was lying in the bed there with its head and eyes bandaged I concentrated on the figure because it somehow seemed familiar. The person started wailing and I shit myself because the sound was not only scary but heart rending as well then a nurse came along and gave him something for the pain and he went quite. I glanced again and that's when I knew where I had seen the shape of this man before it was my old pal Elijah Mack and then everything came flooding back the battle getting wounded the trip

back to our lines being shot everything. I looked up at the crissed crossed steel springs above my head and realised that I was in the bottom tier of a bunk bed I saw the steel wall that Elijah was beside and realised that we were on a hospital ship. I knew as I had realised before that the angel I had first saw was just a nurse looking after me and I felt slightly cheated.

I tried to shout over to Elijah to ask him how he was but it came out as a terrible croak because my throat was raw and I had a terrible thirst and I tried to moisten my lips but I had no saliva in my mouth and my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. I heard movement near to me and then a face appeared above me it was not my lovely angel but the face was kindly and compassionate. I focused on this apparition and saw that it was a nurse her starched apron and hat were a brilliant white colour and then she spoke. "Ah back in the land of the living are we how are you feeling?" To tell the truth I didn't really know how I felt at the moment a little numb and more than a little sore but the pain had not really started again yet then I managed to croak. "Could I have some water please I am spitting bloody feathers here?" The face withdrew but it was back shortly with a small glass of water which she helped me drink and a good job otherwise I would have choked myself but it tasted marvellous. I was just about to ask her to tell Elijah that I was in the next bunk when she said. "Try not to talk too much yet I will go and fetch the doctor he wanted to be told when you woke up again", and she disappeared from my line of sight. A kindly old face now came into my line of sight and I took this to be the doctor as he said. "How are you lad feeling a bit better than when you arrived here no doubt?" He looked down at me with kindly eyes continuing. "The pain medication we are giving you must be working well otherwise you would be screaming like a lot of these other poor men." He took hold of my wrist and pulled a large fob watch from his waistcoat pocket and proceeded to take my pulse. He said. "That's fine young man nice and steady I must admit you had us a bit worried when you arrived I pulled a lot of scrap metal out of you and a couple of bullets it's a wonder that you didn't rattle like ironmongers cart", and he smiled at his joke. He dropped my arm saying. "Right then I must be off there are other patients to see and we don't want to tire you out you need all the rest you can get. The nurse will come back and change your dressings so its goodbye for the moment but I will see you later on", and with this he moved out of my line of sight. I could hear him speaking to the nurse no doubt leaving instructions about me I stared up at the bed springs above my head and resolved to tell the nurse to let Elijah know I was here.

It was about an hour later when the nurse came back to change my dressings and it all went well until she came to the one covering the wound in my groin and I blushed like a beetroot and stammered out that I thought the dressing would be alright and didn't need changing. The nurse looked at me and said. "Nonsense it has to be changed or you would soon be in trouble and there is nothing you have down there that I haven't seen before", and with this she went about changing the dressing. She smiled at me and continued. "Oh lordy lordy and me nursing and married for ten years I've seen it all so there's no need to blush on either your or my account I'm no wilting rose." She finished the dressing off in no time and quite professional she was too but I was glad there was no stirring in that area from me and then she crushed my vanity by saying. "I don't know why there was such a fuss about such a small thing", and she pushed her trolley with the dirty dressings on it and waltzed away down the ward. I was a bit crestfallen and deflated by this remark and I wondered if Helen might feel the same when we were married. Then I thought well the girl in Egypt hadn't complained she hadn't laughed and said it was a 'small thing' and this eased my mind. Then I thought wait a minute she was a whore and wouldn't complain anyway I scowled and thought sod you it doesn't matter anyway. The trouble was that it did and it took me along time to chase the doubt from my mind but by that time it had ceased to matter anyway.

I shouted across the way. "Elijah it's me Billy Boy I am over here on your left hand side how are you bearing up mate?" There was no response so I carried on. "I don't remember anything after I got back near the trench can you tell me what happened after that?" The nurse appeared above me again and asked. "What's all the noise about you can't go about shouting in here there are other

wounded souls who don't need disturbing by you." I replied. "I am sorry but that patient there is one of my best mates called Elijah Mack and I need to speak to him." I explained about the battle and said I could remember everything up to leading him back and getting back in front of our trenches but I could remember anything hardly after that. She looked down at me and there was compassion in her gaze and she smoothed my hair and forehead with her hand saying. "He can't answer you because the pain medication he is on makes him sleep a lot he needs quite and rest." I jumped in replying. "He must be alright he just got a flash bang over his eyes that shouldn't have done that much damage he is alright isn't he?" She looked at me and shook her head looking a little apprehensive as she said. "No I'm afraid its much more serious than that your friend was hit by shrapnel and not only is his face badly scared he has lost his sight as well he was also shot through a lung and it was touch and go with him." Elijah blind it echoed and re-echoed through my brain I could not believe this had happened to us and I started crying and the more I thought about the mates I had lost or who had been injured the worse the sobbing became. Because up until now it had been an adventure despite the squalor and filth of the peninsula I had taken everything in my stride and had put the same hard shell on as the others when dealing with things.

But here now led in this bed with clean sheets in relative comfort hearing the news about Elijah the one person I thought would surely survive this war unscathed brought everything crushing down on top of me. It was now I suddenly realised that big as I was I was still only sixteen years of age and all though I might show the maturity of a twenty year old it counted for nothing and the more this reverberated through my mind the louder and more abandoned my crying became. I sobbed for my mates who had been torn from their families forever and for the ones like Elijah who were terribly mutilated and wounded. I sobbed for my mother and father who I had lost at an early age but more than this I cried for myself and my lost youth and again I asked the question what am I doing here? The nurse tried to comfort me but it was useless the pent up emotions that had been held inside me for so long broke through and just like a dam breaking they flooded out. I probably would have cried myself to death heartbroken at what had happened had I not heard a voice from my left hand side say. "This bloke who's crying bears no comparison to my mate Billy Boy Lamb non whatsoever he was a bonzer bloke who knew the score." I cried out this time in delight and my snivelling stopped right away as I said. "Archie Lane you old Aussie dingo where are you show yourself?" I tried to sit up and find him but the nurse pushed me back gently back saying. "Oh no you don't we will have none of this now either lie back or I will sedate you." Archie told me. I am up here above you they have me perched on this top bunk like a bloody kookaburra in a tree and they won't let me get up either. It was a few days later and Archie had been allowed to get up he was sat beside my bed He had already told me about Ben being killed when they first landed on Gallipoli and that Snowy had been killed the night that he had been injured I told him about Charlie Slater being killed. Then he had told me that we where on the Royal Mail ship Essequibo but it was only a temporary hospital ship and that we would be sailing to the island of Lemnos for transfer to a proper hospital ship.

Sitting beside me now he began to speak about the Aussie landings so I made myself more comfortable as he said. "We invaded at 4:30am so it was concluded that a barrage wasn't necessary because any Turks we encountered would only be guard units." He sighed and continued. "At first it was alright we were towed in the ships boats by steam launch and at first things seemed alright then the dawn came up like a thief stealthily the shadows rolled back and the smudge of grey and inky blue on the landscape faded. As we closed into the shore you could see the phosphorescence of the wave's caps rolling and breaking on the shore and you could almost hear it lapping on the shingle and pebble shore sighing in its anticipation of the caress. As we looked landward we could see the large yellow jagged steep pitted mound that was called the 'Sphinx'. Archie stopped speaking for a moment lost in memories and then he continued. The sea was like a pane of window glass and the twinkling stars had gone back in we had been cast off and we were now nudging our way forward towards the base of the 'Sphinx'. But the best bloody thing about it was that we shouldn't have been anywhere near here our landing beaches were a mile further up the coast." He blows his nose on his

hanky and then returns it to his pocket saying. "For some reason they had cast us off in front of the wrong beachhead and as we are rowed in the Turkish sentries spot us and open fire so by the time we land on the beach they have whistled up support and raised the alarm." Archie offered me a cigarette and we lit up and then he went on with his story. "Well mate we found it hard going at first I can tell you and we were pinned down it was then that someone found a place that wasn't so steep and we could get a toe hold and climb up. All the way up though the Turks were pouring a withering fire down on us but me Ben and Snowy made it to the top and with a bit of help we cleared old Johnny Turk out of there."

Archie stopped again and at first I thought he had dropped off to sleep but then he continued. "We found a path that led up towards the top and as always you know old Ben like a hound on the scent right out in front. Anyway the path twisted and turned on its way up and Ben and some other blokes had just turned this corner when we heard the rat tat tat of a machine gun as we got up to the corner we could see Ben and these other blokes lying on the path." He stopped again until he had once more got his emotions in check and then went on saying. "You see the Turks had a hidden gun position under a rock overhang that covered the whole path and it had wiped out Ben and the blokes who were out in front." Archie coughed and he wiped his face with his hand in a gesture of emotional fatigue. "Well we had no grenades or anything bloody else so we fixed bayonets and charged the bloody thing it was the only way to take it and we couldn't be held up here. To say it was a bit hairy is not doing it justice and we lost a few more good blokes on the way in but then we had a bit of luck the machine gun jammed and this allowed us to get into the position." I looked at Archie full of admiration and thought what courage these Aussies and the New Zealanders who landed with them had. Archie continued again. "Well let me tell you we didn't spare a one of the crew or their guard we gave them the cold steel and Snowy was like a man possessed and kept jabbing at this Turk until his body looked like an old bloody rag." He smiled at the memory then looked at me and said. "Anyway when I could finally pull him away we went back to were Ben and the blokes lay and I picked him up in my arms and cradled him his blood stained my shirt but do you know what Billy Boy he looked so peaceful and he even had a smile on his face", a strangled sob came from his throat then he carried on. "I know it sounds daft but that's the only way to describe the look on his face of course the machine gun had caught him square on and stitched a row of holes across his chest. You know what its like yourself to have the blood of a mate running down your hands it doesn't seem real at first and then it hits you and the pain is almost unbearable."

I felt such compassion for my mate Archie for I knew exactly what he meant we had been through the same thing he had lost Ben at the landing and we had lost Charlie Slater so I felt the same pain. He wiped his face again with his hand and then went on. "Anyway Snowy and me found a little place off the path and we dug a grave for old Ben we thought he would have liked it there as it was quite and quite a nice little spot. Of course he would probably rather have been buried at Balarat but there was no chance of that happening. Anyway after burying our mate me and Snowy and the rest carried on and eventually made it to the top before the Turks threw in a full Division and pushed us back to the positions we near enough hold to this day." The nurse came round and said. "That's enough you two now get some rest or you will never get better we are setting sail soon for Lemnos where you will be transferred to a hospital ship so no more talking", and she went off to harass some other poor buggers. Archie watched her go saying. "She's right I do feel a bit tired do you mind if I tell you the rest later on?" I replied that I was a bit weary myself and that I would have a sleep before tea so we both got our heads down and had a rest.

We woke up later feeling refreshed and we had tea then Archie continued his story. "Well we have been stuck on that little piece of land called Anzac Cove ever since we first took it and were in spitting distance of the Turkish trenches. We have launched god knows how many attacks since we got there and I have lost count of the number of good blokes we have lost." We reflected on this statement and then Archie continued. "Well of course it's probably been the same for you I mean lets face it the whole peninsula is a bag of shit and at the end of the day who really wants it? And let me

tell you between old Johnny Turk having a go at us the bloody Staff and the diseases that are doing the rounds there are not many of us old hands left.” We were quite again for a while thinking of friends we had lost to disease like Eli Woods eventually the story was taken up again. “The Turks launched a massive attack against us in May thousands of the little perishers attacked our positions but we were ready for them. We slaughtered them but I will give them their due they kept on attacking there spunky little buggers and no mistake even though there were that many of their corpses in no man’s land that we could hardly see their trenches. I handed him a cigarette and we lit up before he went on saying. “Later on the smell and flies that came from them meant we had to call a truce so that we could bury them much I must say to the relief of both sides. With Ben gone it was just me and Snowy and then when we attacked ‘Lone Pine’ I got these wounds and Snowy bought the farm.”

I thought that maybe he had finished but he was just taking a rest and carried on saying. “Our trenches faced theirs and the distance varied between them anywhere between sixty and one hundred and fifty yards. So we pushed three tunnels out from the pimple that was our salient opposite ‘Lone Pine’ when the ends were finally opened we would have less than forty yards to cover to reach the Turkish trenches. A barrage had been going on for about three days and it had smashed most of the wire in front of the Turkish trenches. The Turks didn’t know about the attack and didn’t know what hit them when the two assault waves from the 1st Brigade charged out of the tunnel ends. I could see how much this was taking out of him and told him that he didn’t need to continue but he said. “Listen Snowy was a mate of yours just like Charlie and Elijah and the rest were mates of ours he was a bonzer bloke old Snowy and he would want you to know. When we got into their front line trenches we found that they had been roofed over with pine logs and some of these were really elaborate constructions and we kept pushing to find a way in. He stopped and his eyes took on a far away look then he continued. “Some of the blokes fired through gaps in the logs while others poked their bayonets through. Eventually we found a way in and dropped through to the foul smelling galleries below then more of our attack pushed past these trenches and stormed the communication ones. Troops poured across from our trenches to reinforce us and considering we had launched a frontal assault our casualties were fairly light.”

He stopped again and shouted for the nurse when she came he asked her for a glass of water she fetched one and he drank it down in one saying. “Ah that’s better my mouth was drier than a camels asshole.” He then carried on with his story. “The place were most of our casualties occurred and where Snowy got his was underground in these galleries and saps the fighting was vicious down here hand to hand using bayonets and bombs and it was brutal in its intensity. We were kicking and punching stabbing there were shouts and screams that echoed round the galleries and we were stepping on the bodies of the dead and wounded.” He stopped and I could see the horror in his eyes then he continued. “It was here that Snowy bought it though he saved my life and few more in the process this Turk threw a grenade and it headed straight for us and we had nowhere to go so Snowy just threw himself down on top of it.” The tears now streamed down his face and he cuffed at them with his hand saying. “I shouted no to him but it was too late the explosion ripped his chest and guts to pieces I could see that he had gone the fighting passed on but I sat down and cradled him in my arms like I had with Ben. I whispered to him no bloody hero’s son, that is what we always said to one another and here he was playing the hero and getting himself killed. I said to myself here is another son of Balarat that wont be going home and I knew that we were leaving to many good blokes behind here in some places out dead was piled three and four deep. I was injured further on in the galleries when a bomb went off and I was hit in the chest thigh and arm with shrapnel and I was out of it.”

He looked at me and shook his head grief etched on his face. “The Turks counter attacked for a few days and we were reinforced by the 2nd and 3rd Battalions and everyone wanted to fight here at ‘Lone Pine’. I had heard of blokes stuck in the reserves that had offered bribes of up to a fiver to get to the front line. It was all bombs now the Turks had a lot as well as grenades which were still like

rocking horse shit for us to get hold of. Some of the bombs were thrown back three and four times between the trenches before they exploded. Archie laughed as he said this and then carried on. "I saw blokes who had lost a hand like this picking up more bombs with their good hand and throwing them back you think they would have had more sense. I was down on the beach at the aid station by this time but they could do nothing for me really and so they loaded me on board this tub as our hospital ship had already set sail but the doctors were alright on here and did me proud. So that's it sport you know everything that happened to Snowy Ben and me and to tell you the truth its done me good to tell it to a mate and get it off my chest."

I felt a shudder run through the ship and the sound of the anchor being pulled up and about an hour later we were sailing away from Gallipoli heading for Lemnos and our date with the hospital ship. We cut through the blue Aegean Sea at quite a fair pace and the rolling and swaying of the ship soon lulled me and Archie to sleep when we awoke Archie said. "We are going to have to do something about Elijah we will have to get him on his feet again and behaving normally if we can after all we can't leave him like he is can we?" I replied. "Yes I know what you mean and I don't mind saying that I'm worried about him and his state of mind we will have to jolly him along a bit." Although the voyage was fairly short I was glad when we were transferred to the larger hospital ship as the screaming and praying and the constant calls for mothers and fathers and sister and brothers was heartbreaking. We entered the harbour of Moudros and there we were transferred to the liner Mauritania which had been turned into a hospital ship the public rooms had been turned into wards Officers had the cabins and the dinning rooms had been turned into operating theatres. The whole of the huge liner had been painted white and there were huge red crosses painted on the sides and we sat sail that night. I thought to myself this is more like it the large public rooms kitted out as wards were roomy and airy and the décor of them was both elegant and opulent I mean after all this had been one of the worlds finest liners. The only thing that hadn't changed was the cries of the wounded men in agony or the mutterings of the fever ridden and we knew that the serious dysentery cases were all in one ward on the port side. If it hadn't have been for the morphine and other pain medication we received we would have been gibbering wrecks for the pain was never far away and men like Elijah needed it badly. When you looked round the ward you could see men both arms missing men with one or two legs missing men who had been eviscerated and emasculated. There were wrecks of men some with no faces and some with half their head shot away there were bayonet wounds bullet wounds shrapnel wounds all kinds of wounds and it broke your heart just to see them. We made the crossing to Egypt in three days and we were once again waiting to enter Alexandria harbour as we had done what now seemed a lifetime ago once in we would be ferried ashore and then to hospital. Elijah was not sedated anymore but he hardly said a word when I and Archie spoke to him not even when I informed him that Johnny Grundy was dead. We were eventually transferred to No 19 General Hospital in Alexandria and as luck would have it we were all kept together and put in the same ward.

Chapter Ten

Although I was worried about Elijah I was more worried about myself, my nerves now that we were safe had been shot to pieces and the full horror of what had happened on the peninsula had caught up with me. The kindly old doctor who had operated on me had transferred to the Mauritania from our mail ship and he told me that I had been extremely lucky. It seemed that the machine gun bullets that hit me had been deflected off something and so had not hit me with their full force. The doctor said to me. "I expect you to make a quick recovery and there should be no lasting damage from the bullet wounds however the shrapnel may be a bit harder to mend but given time to rest I see no reason why you shouldn't soon be back with your unit." I thought to myself what unit as far as I knew there were hardly any of the Company left and surely they wouldn't transfer me back to the

peninsular because I didn't think I could take it back there anymore. The one ray of sunshine in all of this mess was that a fair bit of mail had caught up to us so there were a few letters from Helen and Rosie to read. Helen had trained as a nurse and was now working in a hospital in Manchester but she had written that anytime soon she expected to move over to France and a field hospital to carry on her nursing duty. The news did not fill me with enthusiasm and I hoped that she would still be at home when I got back there or at least I prayed she would. From Rosie's letters it seemed that she was doing her bit as well and I read that she had got a job making ammunition in one of the new armaments factories that had sprang up in the town.

Archie read Elijah the letters from his wife and at least these seemed to cheer him up for a short while but soon he would be back to normal just lying there and saying nothing to anyone. It was like he had just given up altogether and if he didn't pull out of this depression soon I didn't think he would pull out of it at all. I had tried talking to him but it was all to no avail he had only spoken to me once saying, "You should have left me on the battlefield because I would be better off dead than blind with half a lung and half a face." I didn't know what to say to this and a black depression settled on me as I realised that Elijah was blaming me for his condition. However a few days later George, Frank and Bert turned up they had heard we were here and had wangled some time off to come and see us. I looked at Frank who had aged quite a bit over the last few months and it was hard to relate him to the jovial quite man who had joined up with us at the Town Hall. He sat down and asked me if I would mind going over what had happened so I told him the story of the landing and what had happened to the twins when I finished he went and stood in the garden staring into space. Bert told me that Jimmy had survived but that he had been sent back to blighty and would be invalided out of the service as his wound was far too serious for him to stay in.

Of course George and Bert wanted to know everything that had happened so I had to go through all of the deaths again. Charlie, Eli, Johnny, Lt Cole and a lot more than Archie had to tell them about Ben and Snowy. They looked down in the mouth after this but they were nowhere near as down as me and Archie had to go through all this again. Then they informed us that they would have to be leaving in a minute to get back to Mex Camp but they would come again when they could and they would fetch some supplies for us fruit and the like. They had tried talking to Elijah but he had just ignored them as though they didn't exist so they just shook their heads shrugged at us and then went to get Frank and to travel back to camp. A lot of the time we would sit out in the gardens that surrounded the hospital and the warm sun and fresh air made a wonderful change from the antiseptic smell of the ward. We read and smoked played cards and crown and anchor we pushed Elijah round in a wheelchair and he didn't seem to mind this but he still didn't talk or even seem to recognise who we were. A lot of the time we would talk to the nurses and doctors just to hear different voices from the ones we were used to and heard all the time. A few days later George, Frank and Bert turned up again and shocked me by telling me the Battalion was heading back to England and then over to France for some big show that was about to happen. The advance party would be leaving in a couple of weeks and the rest would leave a couple of weeks after that. They also told us that our Company from Gallipoli was coming back as there were so few men left in it that it wasn't worth it staying there. This news of embarkation had shocked me severely and I said to them, "I will have to find out what is going to happen to me and Elijah and whether we will be returning with you or staying here for some time longer."

After the lads had gone a nurse came to change my dressings and I asked, "Can you tell me how long I am going to be kept here", she looked at me saying nothing and finished the dressings. I continued saying, "You see my Battalion's going back to England and I wouldn't mind going back to blighty with my mates if that is possible?" She smiled at me and told me, "I will find out what I can for you and I will ask one of the doctors to have a word." She was as good as her promise and a short time later a doctor in a white coat turned up beside my bed and asked me, "Is it you that wants to leave our lovely little hospital?" I told him what I had told the nurse about the Battalion leaving so he said, "I am afraid that we can't let you go just yet as those shrapnel wounds are taking longer to

heal than we thought but you should be able to leave us by about October then you will be ready for duty.” He continued saying. “However your friend there will be leaving on the next hospital ship in two days time at home he can be taken care of better and they have more expertise of caring for his face wounds and the depression that is gripping him. Of course he will be invalidated out of the service but he will live and with time I am hoping he will recover a lot of his mobility and his mental health.” He walked away and Archie came over to me and said. “Listen Billy Boy its for the best he will get more specialised and better treatment back in England than he would do here.” I replied. “I know your right Archie but I can’t help feeling that I have let him down in some way and I feel so helpless. Archie patted me on the shoulder saying. “Well you haven’t you’ve been a good mate and when he is better he will see that so don’t worry”, and he went off to get a book to read.

We said goodbye to Elijah but we might as well not have bothered because he was in a world of his own and as he was carried out he didn’t say a word or even acknowledge us. I said to Archie. “I hope they can do something for him back home it’s a crying shame what’s happened to him.” Archie nodded his head as he watched him go saying. “I hope they can as well mate because it would be tragic if he stayed like that for evermore I mean what will his missus and kids think if he is like that with them?” I didn’t need to answer that as we both knew they would be heartbroken and who could blame them. The doctor came and examined me and a nurse changed my dressings again as the doctor said. “You are making excellent progress and I am quite pleased with the way you are mending you are right on track”, and he then went to examine Archie.

A few days later the lads came back to say goodbye and take their leave as they were going back to England with the advance party we told them that Elijah was on his way back so it was a sad day all round. Gorge came up to me first saying. “Well Billy Boy take care of yourself and get better soon don’t be hanging around here chasing nurses get back to the Battalion as soon as you can.” Bert came up next and hugged me as he said. “Take care of yourself old friend I will need you to be my best man next year as me and Mabel are getting married I popped the question in one of my letters and she said yes.” I shook him by the hand. “Good for you Bert I am so pleased for the pair of you and I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Archie shouted across good on you clobber I hope that your Aussie mate here is going to get an invite?” Bert replied. “Course you are Archie after all we regard you as being one of the lads and I can grantee it will be a day to remember.” I saw that George had a rueful smile on his face at this news and I remembered that he had taken quite a shine to Mabel at one time. Next Frank came over to me he shook my hand saying. “I just wanted to thank you for telling me what happened to the twins I saw the pain and sorrow it caused you but it made a big difference to me knowing. So you take care and get better the catch us up as quick as you can because it wont be the same without you after all you are now one of the only battle hardened veterans we have.” The lads left after saying their goodbyes to Archie and the ward seemed a sadder place for their leaving and I would be glad to get out of here as it was getting a bit depressing now. After the lads sailed for England time began to drag at the hospital and I would watch the people who had been cured heading back to their units with envy. Then came a real low point when Archie’s turn came to be released he was going back to Mena Camp to Cairo to join another Battalion. We said our goodbyes and he told me. “Well Billy Boy mate its time for me to be off but I will surely miss you so watch your back and take care of yourself and I will see you at Bert’s wedding in the summer so till then look after yourself cheerio Billy Boy”, we shook hands and then hugged we broke apart and Archie left the ward stopping at the entrance and giving me a last salute.

With Archie gone it was nearly unbearable and a black mood descended on me and I moped about the ward like a dead man walking locked into my depression. The trouble was that with no one there I knew my mind was dwelling again on the events that happened on the Peninsula and the nightmares had returned with a vengeance. I was spiralling father and father down into the depths of despair and I didn’t seem to be able to stop myself. Then when I had been at the hospital nearly two months the doctor came to see me he gave me a thorough examination and said. “Well I suppose you will be glad Pte Lamb because you will be leaving us the day after tomorrow you era finally going

home and will travel on the hospital ship Asturias and judging from the grin on your face it wont be day to soon.” I replied. “Thank you very much Sir you don’t know what it means to me I am itching to get back to my Battalion.” He now had a frown on his face as he informed me. “You will not be able to go back on active service straight away you will still need some treatment and this and your dressing changed will be set up at your local hospital. Also you will have a spot of leave coming so just enjoy it after a few weeks and when the doctor back there says so you will be able to rejoin your unit.” The time really dragged now and I couldn’t wait to leave here though I thought I never would but the time came and I did boarding the hospital ship Asturias and then sailing that night in convoy for home.

I was over the moon and couldn’t stop grinning like the village idiot the thought of seeing home again filled me with happiness and I willed the ship to sail faster. Then I thought about seeing Helen and all of a sudden I wasn’t so sure the black moods that had overtook me since Gallipoli were frightening and things seemed to have changed irrevocably forever. I would just have to play things by ear all though in her letters nothing seemed to have changed and they were full of love and endearments still you never knew. After all I had certainly changed because nobody should have to go through the squalor, filth and danger that we had been through let alone losing your friends at such a rate as to make your head spin. I was terrified that the things I had experienced might have changed my feelings towards Helen made me more coarse or brutal I didn’t think they had but the again you never knew. It was a wet Wednesday when the hospital ship docked at its berth at Southampton Docks and the badly wounded were being disembarked on their stretchers. I and the rest of the walking wounded filed down the gangplank and there at the bottom were a group of FANNY’S running a canteen and handing us mugs of tea as we filed past. I drank my cup of tea and then went to see the Transportation Officer about my rail pass as I had no money apart from a few pennies. I went to the Office and waited in line behind the rest of the blokes that were there the line seemed to moving very slow but that might just have been me. There was a Captain sitting at the table as I got up to it he looked up as I saluted and seemed non to pleased to see me the first thing he said was. “Where the hell have you come from and where did you get a uniform that looks like that you are more like a tramp than a member of his Majesties army!” I must admit that my uniform was a bit informal the shirt was three sizes to large for me as was the tunic I had on a pair of shorts that were a might small I had no cap and was wearing plimsolls on my feet. The Transport Officer continued berating me. “How dare you turn up dressed that way I’ve a good mind to have you slung in a cell and brought up on charges? Well what have you got to say in your defence and it had better be good?” I could feel the black mood begin to descend on me but I thought careful you could be shot for clouting a fucking wind bag like this Captain so I said. “Well Sir I have just stepped off the hospital ship Asturias and before that I was in hospital in Alexandria and before that I was on Gallipoli.” Things had gone deathly silent in the office now so I continued. “My uniform was cut off at the aid station Sir and ever since I have been dressed in pyjamas and a dressing gown I was given short notice about coming home and these odds and sods you see me in mow Sir were all the nurses on the hospital ship could find me.”

The whole queue was listening now and the mention of Gallipoli had them all hooked and I could see the astonishment on some of their faces as well as on this jumped up Captains and he looked like someone had just fed him a turd as he turned to me again saying. “Well it would seem that under the circumstances we can overlook the uniform this time so just wait there a moment”, and he shouted of a Corporal in the back room. Then he turned back to me and said. “Right lad where are you going show me your orders, right Blackthorn”, he stamped my papers and gave me a rail pass saying. “I see you have convalescent leave did you suffer from some kind of disease?” I nearly said. “Yes a Turkish one”, but I thought better of it and just replied instead. “No Sir I was wounded at the third battle of Krithia.” He looked up at me and I saw the shock on his face then he said. “Right lad go with the Corporal here and he will see you get a new uniform the see the Paymaster he will issue with a little of your outstanding pay the rest you will get from your Battalion.” I thanked him and followed the Corporal to the stores and there I received a brand new

uniform including socks underwear and boots. I changed out of my mismatched stuff and left them for the stores NCO to burn then I boarded my train to begin the first part of my journey back home I sat back and closed my eyes as the train started but they soon flew wide open as the nightmares started again.

I don't know how many times I changed trains or how often we stopped to let other trains pass us by but eventually I arrived at Blackthorn station and it was joyful but sorrowful at the same time. Because I could not help but think about a time not that long ago when five soldiers were excited about stepping off the train to start their leave. Now two of them were dead one was a cripple and one was blind and had only half a face and lung and I had been wounded the odds had not been in our favour. I stepped down onto the platform and it seemed to be a dirty shade of grey and with the rain sweeping across in a curtain of silver droplets it was dismal and depressing I shivered for I was unused to the cold and had no greatcoat for warmth. I walked out of the front of the station and went to catch a tram to General Gordon Street but as I walked to the stop the memories of Charlie came flooding back and I all but fainted at the vivid recollections that assailed my senses. As the tram rattled across the junctions and carried on towards my stop the wound in my leg was giving me jip and my groin had started to ache abominably and I didn't know if it was because of the weather or what. I got off the tram and walked along towards General Gordon Street at the junction with Nelson Street I considered going to see Charlie's mother but I just didn't have the stomach for it. In fact the last thing I wanted to do was to relate the tale of Charlie's death to his grieving mother it would not only upset her but it would upset me as well as starting off the nightmares again. So I kept on walking and as I did so my limp became more pronounced so the by the time I turned into the gate of 123 General Gordon Street I felt as though I only had one leg.

As I was about to knock on the door I stopped and thought do I really want to enter here I mean so much had changed in such a short time and nothing would ever be the same again. I couldn't bring myself to knock at least not just yet too many things were turning over in my head I had some money in my pocket and so I decide to head to the Intack inn and see if anyone I knew was there on leave. I caught a tram back to town and got off at the stop walking over to the Intack and pushing open the saloon bar door as I walked in Mr Tillman said. "Hello Billy Boy I haven't seen you for a while here the first drink is on me." I walked over to the bar and Mrs Tillman came over and joined me she said to me. "Come on lad lets get you a seat with that bad leg of yours we cant have our heroes standing up can we", and she sat me down by the fire and sat next to me. She really was a good looking woman and just as strong minded she shouted over to the bar. "Come on with this poor lads drink and fetch me a sherry with it while your at it your slower than a drunken slug." As she turned back to talk to me I could see Mr Tillman muttering under his breath and pulling a face at his wife but he made sure she could not see him do it. He came across and his whole attitude had changed to one of fawning on his wife he really did have more faces than the 'Town Hall Clock', as he said. "There you go my love and here you are Billy Boy", he placed the drinks on the table and retreated back to the bar where he poured himself a whiskey. Mrs Tillman sipped her sherry and said. "Get your pint supped lad are you just back from France is that where you got wounded?" I looked into her beautiful face and replied. "I was at Gallipoli and have just come back from Alexandria today on a hospital ship." Mrs Tillman exclaimed! "You poor lamb we have read about the terrible conditions out there and all the young lads being killed and injured and those Australians and New Zealanders. I was only saying to Joshua the other day how terrible it must be out there", she stopped talking and there were tears in her eyes.

The place was beginning to fill up now and get busy and a lot of the people that were coming in seemed to be war workers with reserved occupations. They were rowdy and noisy and waving a lot of money about and when I looked at them I thought what a bunch of cowardly shits I had lost a lot of good mates so that these scavengers could have a cushy war. Mrs Tillman must have seen the look of disgust on my face because she said. "I know their a noisy set of coves but Joshua likes them coming in if it was left up to me I wouldn't have them in the place I think it's a disgrace the amount

of money they are making.” She glared at their backs as she continued. “No I don’t like it at all when they sit safe at home while brave lads like you are away fighting. It’s not right and like I say they are making real good money and to me that’s taking advantage and profiting from our boys at the front.” She sipped her sherry and at this moment I felt very lonely with out my mates I would have given anything to have Elijah or Bert or any of my other comrades in the Battalion here with me. It was different being in the army and especially being in a Pals Battalion because we were special and a race apart from civilians like these stood at the bar. I could feel the black depression descending on me again and the almost tangible hate that I felt for those shirking bastards stood at the bar waving their money and drinking.

I stood up to go and Mrs Tillman said. “Where are you off to lad it’s only early yet and I don’t want you going home in that frame of mind so sit yourself back down and get warm in front of the fire you look freezing.” I was going to argue but she continued. “My name is Anne and all your drinks tonight are on the house that’s the way a returning wounded hero should be treated. So you just sit there have a drink and stop fretting about those good for nothings at the bar I will sit here and look after you don’t worry.” I thought to myself what a good woman the exact opposite of her husband because this was just like her she would do anything for you and had a heart of gold. She shouted to Mr Tillman. “Did you hear what I said Joshua young Billy Boy doesn’t pay for a drink tonight?” She turned back to talk to me but then stopped saying to him again. “Put your face straight it looks like a wet weekend a few beers aren’t going to put us in the poor house so while your at it another beer for the lad and another sherry for me and don’t take all day.” When he went back to the bar after serving our drinks Mr Tillman’s face had a bigger scowl on it than usual and so he poured himself another whiskey then polished a glass furiously while his wife drank her sherry and talked to me. So I stayed at the Intack for a short time and enjoyed myself talking to Anne and watching the misery on Mr Tillman’s face every time a free drink was ordered for me. I might have stayed even longer had not one of the shirkers noticed my uniform and detaching himself from the bar came over he then proceeded to tell me how we should go about winning the war. I thought to myself what a fucking cheek this bloke who had never heard a shot fired in anger in his miserable life was telling me how to fight the war. Of course there were a lot of this type in the pubs talking a good war from the comfort of bar or vault, bloody idiots who had no idea what war was all about.

I could hear him rambling on but it seemed to come from miles off as he said. “Now take what is happening in France I would have that sorted out in no time I can tell you we have to get our lads out of the trenches and get them to show a bit more aggression going forward after all its only the Germans we are fighting.” The room seemed to come to life again and the noise from the bar was loud and crashing and hurt my ears at first. Then I thought I can’t listen to this bullshit anymore and I was just about to stand up and punch the bastard right in the middle of his smug well fed face when Anne exploded like a signal rocket. She stood up and her hands went onto her hips and although she was only a small woman she was a real hellion with a tongue that could cut like a knife she started on the man stood in front of us saying. “Listen here you pompous windbag what would you know about anything let alone the bloody war. You sit here safe at home with no intentions of going anywhere near the fighting and try to tell brave lads like this one how the war should be won you make me ill you really do.” Her chin jutted forward and her eyes blazed and she was awesome to watch I can tell you however I was glad that he was on the receiving end and not me. She continued. “This young lad has been in the fighting and he got wounded for his troubles so he doesn’t need a shithouse like you butting into a private chat and shouting the odds and neither do I. So take your advice elsewhere and your unwanted presence as well and think yourself lucky that brave lads like this are fighting so you can carry on making lots of money nice and safely.” The ‘Armchair General’ looked at Anne in amazement and I noticed that his face was as white as a baker’s apron that was until the colour rushed back to his cheeks. Now his face was lobster red as a blush of shame covered his face and neck and he tried to stammer out a few words but failed miserably and his mouth just opened and shut like a ventriloquist’s dummy.

Anne had not finished and said. "Not another word out of you mister get out of my pub and don't ever come back we don't need the likes of you using the Intack Inn so just crawl back into which ever sewer you came from." The man stepped forward whether to remonstrate with her or to grasp her I don't no but before I could move Anne's hand curled into a fist and she lashed out like a striking snake. It caught this cove square on his upturned nose with enough force to squash it and make the blood flow down the front of his clothing. The look of shock on his face was worth all the shit he had been talking and then to see him flee the battlefield with his tail between his legs was priceless and made my night. He went through the door faster than Anne had hit him and she shouted. "Mind the door doesn't hit you up the arse on the way out." She then apologised to me saying. "I am sorry about that lad what must you think and me using language like a docker but I just cant stand blokes like that they make my blood boil." I looked at Anne now with a new kind of respect and also a certain amount of wariness as that right hand would have made the Battalion boxing champion proud. But I was not the only one looking at the landlady through new eyes all the war workers at the bar had watched the altercation and were now staring at Anne. She glared back at them and said. "What's wrong with you lot have you never seen anyone evicted from a public house before? I would suggest that unless you want the same treatment as that idiot that you get on with your ale and stop staring as though this is a penny peepshow", and having blasted the shirkers she sat back down with me.

I had never seen a bunch of blokes move as fast for they had all spun round faster than a pickpocket could dip a wallet and were now staring into there drinks and never once did they look in our direction. I turned to Anne and said. "Thanks for everything tonight you made my first night back a lot better than it would have been." She looked at me and smiled as she replied. "Stay longer if you want I like your company and it is easy to chat with you." I told her. "Sorry I can't stay any longer I had better get back home I haven't seen anyone there yet and I don't want to turn up too late on the first day of my leave." She said. "I understand lad you get off home to your loved ones and make sure there alright but just wait there a moment." She went to the bar and came back with a whiskey gave then gave it to me saying. "To keep the night chill away love you get that down you." I thanked her for I was really touched by her kindness she kissed me on the lips and said. "Off you go lads and if I was a few years younger I would be off with you I bet all the ladies are falling over themselves to get at you", and she laughed. My face turned beetroot red at this comment but I managed to stammer out another thank you before I left the Intack and headed for home. On the way back to General Gordon Street I thought about Anne's generosity and what a fine woman she was going out of her way to make a young soldier like me welcome on leave. I also thought again about her standing up to that bloke and bridling like a ginger tom cat and the punch she had gave him no wonder Mr Tillman always did as she told him. But then I thought about the other civilians I had met we were no longer the same if they asked you about the war you couldn't talk to them and explain because you would be wasting your time they were only bothered about their own ideas of it. They hadn't the slightest idea of what conditions were really like nor would they ever be able to grasp the sheer horror and gut wrenching terror of battle or even a raid. So I had come to the conclusion that I would say nothing to these strangers it would be better that way I would only talk with my own kind.

Chapter Eleven

I got off the tram and retraced my steps back to the house I now no longer felt the same trepidation that had overtaken me the first time I came here. I walked down General Gordon Street and turned into the gate of No 123 walking up the path I halted in front of the door and then knocked on it. A short time later the door opened and in the light from the hallway I could see that the figure stood there was Mabel Smith Bert's fiancé who boarded here at Ma Moffat's. She looked shocked when she saw me and a small gasp escaped her lips I looked at her and noticed that she was still a

very good looking girl though she did look a little tired. A smile formed on her lips and tears welled up in her eyes as she said. "Its lovely to see you Billy Boy how are you? Of course Bert told us you had been wounded and then your letters to Rosie and Helen arrived, have you seen Bert yet?" She was trying so hard to ask me questions that they were spilling from her mouth and they tumbled over each other such was her haste to ask them and her excitement at seeing me stood there. I smiled back at her and replied. "Hello Mabel can I come in and I will try to answer all your questions to tell you the truth it is a bit nippy out here I'm not used to the weather anymore and my leg is aching like the devil." She stepped back and I moved into the hallway she hugged me and kissed my cheek saying. "Forgive me Billy Boy I don't know where my manners have gone I am sorry what must you think of me keeping you waiting on the doorstep while I prattled on and you a wounded hero as well", and her cheeks flushed a rather nice shade of pink.

I took off my cap and Mabel took it and hung it on the hallstand then she ushered me through to the front parlour. I was just about to sit down and ease the pain in my leg and groin when Mabel said. "Come into the kitchen where its warm and I will make you a mug of tea and something to eat." It was only then that I saw there was no fire in the grate and felt the chill for the first time I also noticed how empty the place looked and felt. I turned to walk out but not before Mabel had seen the look on my face and she apologised saying. "Sorry but we don't use most of the rooms now there's only Ma, Beth, Rosie and me left here now." I was about to ask the question when she answered me. "Beth's up with Ma at the moment Rosie's in bed she has only just got back from work and it is hard on her I was just making up Ma's medicine for later on tonight", she then ushered me out of the parlour and down the hallway to the kitchen. It was warm when I sat down in the kitchen something I was extremely glad of I pulled my chair up to the table and Mabel got the mugs out I noticed that the kettle was already steaming away on the hearth. She turned to me saying. "I think we have some cold beef left or maybe you would like some bread and cheese, no I know how about some bacon and eggs that will set you up" and she turned to go to the pantry." She stopped in her tracks as I said. "No thanks Mabel I don't really fancy any food I will settle for the mug of tea if you don't mind". I took out my cigarette case and opened it I only had two fags left but I knew that Mabel didn't smoke and I would pick up some more in the morning. I turned the cigarette case that Helen had given me over in my hand it was the only part of my possessions I had left I put it back into my pocket and buttoned it then I lit up as Mabel poured my tea. She asked me. "Are you sure I cant get you anything Billy Boy after all you need to keep your strength up?" I replied. "No thanks love I will just have the tea and a fag I am more tired than anything." I picked up the mug and took a swig god it tasted like heaven strong and sweet but I could feel the fatigue begin to wash over me and my groin and leg where now aching and burning the pain a living thing and my back had began to throb uncomfortably. I thought it was best to get things over with and so I said. " The last time I saw Bert was in Alexandria when he told me about the wedding and asked me to be his best man oh and by the way congratulations I am really pleased for the both of you", at hearing this a pink glow suffused her neck and cheeks. I continued. "I have only just arrived back so I have seen no one from the Battalion but they know I will be staying here and so they will no doubt send instructions to me." She picked up her mug looked over the top of the rim as she blew on her tea and said. "Right then tell me everything that has happened to you since you went away some of it I know from Bert but not all of it?"

I wiped my face with my hand and it came away wet with cold sweat I didn't think I could go over everything tonight because all I wanted to do was curl up in my pit and sleep for a week. I saw the concern in her eyes as she asked. "Are you all right you look a bit ill sitting there I do hope that your not coming down with something?" "I replied I feel a bit gip my wounds are hurting me and I am so tired that I think I will fall asleep on the table so if you don't mind I will tell you tomorrow but at the moment I am bone weary so I will take myself off to bed." She came around the table and hugged me saying. "I'm so sorry Billy Boy please forgive me I just wasn't thinking keeping you up here talking and you being ill of course you must get off to bed after all you will have been travelling all day still just have another cup of tea while I make sure your room is alright and that the bedding has been changed and I light a fire for you", she poured me another cup of tea that I did not really

want and then went off upstairs. I nearly laughed out loud at the thought of a couple of dirty sheets and a bit of dust and the squalor disease and filth we had put up with on the peninsula but instead I ended up crying with tears streaming down my face and dripping into the tea on the table. Why was I crying because someone cared enough about me here to check my room out and make sure it was comfortable enough for me? Well yes it was and it made a difference which I so much appreciated but I managed to stem the flow of tears just as Mabel came back and told me my room was now ready and I could go to bed. We wished each other goodnight and she kissed me on my cheek again then I wended my weary way to bed only just managing to drag my feet up the stairs and down the corridor to my room. I stripped off and crawled under the covers and my head had only just touched the pillow when I went out like a light and languished in a state of unconsciousness.

I awoke in the morning and struggled stiffly from bed I looked out of the window the day outside was cold, wet and miserable which just about summed up my feelings to a tee. I got dressed and wandered down the hallway then I had a thought I would nip in and see how Ma was so I started downstairs to the first floor. I was just nearing Ma's door when Beth came out the look of delight in her eyes when she saw me made my morning and she ran to me and hugged me to her not inconsiderable bosom. She said. "Oh Billy Boy I am so happy to see you it seemed like you had been gone for years, Mabel told me you were back last night and I was so excited that I nearly came to your room to see you", I noticed she looked a bit startled as she revealed this. She continued. "But then Mabel told me how tired you were and that your wounds were hurting if they still are I could get you something for the pain if you want it would be no trouble?" I declined for the moment because although I was a bit stiff the sleep I had last night must have done me some good because the pain was just a dull throb and I hardly noticed it. I said to Beth. "How's Ma has she changed I read in one of the letters that Rosie wrote me that she was getting much better?" Beth had a little habit of putting her right hand little finger in the corner of her mouth and sucking it when she concentrated. She removed it now and replied. "Ma's a hundred times better than what she was she gets up now for a spell every day and she is more her old self though I doubt if she will ever fully recover completely." Then she smiled as though remembering something before saying. "I will tell you something for nothing Billy Boy Ma's recovery is mainly down to your Helen and how she nursed her through the illness before she went to Manchester.

Just the mention of Helen tugged at my heartstrings and brought a smile to my face Beth continued. "She was an angel was Helen nothing to much trouble reading to Ma and ministering to her even when she had to work. In fact I will tell you that Rosie, Beth and I count have coped without her and she being just a slip of a girl." I was proud of Helen and I am sure it showed in my face though I replied. "It took all of you to care for Ma and I am sure Helen would be the first to say that I just wish I could have done more to help myself." Beth had a calculated look on her face when she said. "Helen would say that but only because she is too much of a young lady to take the credit and as far as were concerned she is a saint." But now a look of softness formed in her easy as she told me. "You could do no more Billy Boy and believe me the women of this country are grateful to all you lads that are fighting our enemies and keeping them away from our shores. I did not want to dwell on this subject not only because it embarrassed me but because of Frank I didn't know if she was over his death or not so I said. "How are you keeping yourself Beth is everything alright with you?" She replied. "I am not too bad you have to keep going don't you although there was a time I'm sure you knew when Frank was killed that I never thought I would be Alright again but thanks to the love and kindness I got from Rosie, Helen and Mabel I survived." Her face looked a little forlorn so she changed the subject saying. "Rosie will be so glad to see you she is at work at the moment down the munitions factory but she will be back tonight." She gave me a funny look and there was concern on her face as she continued. "I was hoping that you might have a word with her because someone needs to she wont listen to me and she wont like me saying but the work there is killing her and I need you to persuade her to give it up.

I thought this over and said to her grinning. "When has she ever done anything that I've told her to do?" Changing the subject to something on more solid ground or so I thought I asked. "How's Charlie are his wounds mended yet I expected him to be back home by now?" Tears started to fall from Beth's eyes and to catch in her lashes before shedding down her cheeks a small sob like a sigh escaped her lips as she replied. I moved towards her and held her as a strange feeling of foreboding came over me and I wondered if he were dead or not she pulled away and replied. "Of course the letter wouldn't have reached you because you got wounded." And she looked so frail and vulnerable like a little bird and I tried to stop her going on but I couldn't. "We only got to know a couple of months back when a letter arrived from the War Department telling us although Charlie had recovered from his wounds his mind was gone and they would have to keep him in an army sanatorium for further treatment." She blew her nose on a dainty little hanky and then carried on. "We have received no information when or if he might be coming home or even if they can make him better." I felt ashamed and wished I had never asked the question in the first place but Beth continued saying. "We wrote and asked if we could visit him but we were told this wasn't allowed and that they would let us know when it was in the meantime we should refrain from contacting them." Knowing what I did from the wounded I had been with from Gallipoli those dried out silent husks who used to be men I had a good idea why they would not let them see Charlie but I kept quite not wanting to upset her further. I was dreading my next question as I asked. "How did Ma take the news then I mean Charlie is now all she has left?" Beth looked at me and sobbed again replying. "When we read her both letters she just said well maybe that's the best place for him and from that day she has never mentioned his name again its as though he's as dead as Frank."

I held her to me until the sobbing stopped and then I said. "I will nip in and see Ma and have a chat with her for a while but I will try not to tire her." She replied. "That's good Billy Boy she will be glad to see you she knows your home and has been looking forward to you popping in on her after all you were always her favourite." She turned to walk towards the stairs then stopped and looked back at me saying. "I meant what I said Billy Boy it really is good to see you back home", she turned again and reached the stairs going down them I grasped the handle of the door gave a knock turned it and walked into Ma's room. As I entered the room I noticed how light it was prior to this every time I had been in here it was either nighttimes or the curtains were closed. I looked round and saw Ma sat in an easy chair by the fire she was well wrapped up and had a blanket draped over her shoulders and one on her knees and she was wearing thick socks the colour of pea soup. She looked up at me and spoke. "It does my old heart good to see you stood there Billy Boy I haven't seen you in quite a while everyone else has gone off to this terrible war." I was wearing an old cricket sweater and had plimsolls on my feet so she obviously thought that I was a civilian. Then she continued saying. "Yes an evil war so evil and all my lodgers have gone yes gone now why have they gone?" She was rambling a bit by now and I wondered if seeing me had some how set her back. But I said to her. "Hello Ma it's nice to see you looking so well how are you feeling at the moment?" She replied. "I cant complain really I will come downstairs after and make your tea I know you will like that I will find something nice for your tea because you're a good lad Billy Boy." She stared into the flames of the fire and it took me back a bit Ma saying this because Beth had not mentioned that she could get about. Still if she could do a bit of cooking it would take her mind off her worries and would possibly do some good for her body which looked sunk and frail. I kept an eye on her as she watched the flames but there was a vacancy to her look that didn't seem quite right but I shrugged it off thinking it was me.

I said to her. "I was sorry to hear about Charlie Ma it must have come as a big shock to you?" She just sat there and stared at the fire but I persisted. "Still when he is on the mend they will probably let you go and visit him and after that he will probably be allowed back home." I might as well have talked to myself for all the notice she took it was like Beth had said it was as though Charlie never existed. She broke her gaze from the fire and then looked at me saying. "You had better be getting off to work now Billy Boy and give that idler George Drew a shout he never can get out of bed in the mornings." She shooed me with hands that looked like the withered twigs of long

dead trees. I was mortified in the change that had come over her but I played along. I said. "Right you are Ma I will give George a shout and make sure he's up." She replied. "Tell Rosie to give you some breakfast and to make sure the lodgers breakfast is on as well I will do the tea tonight I just need to shrug off this cold I seem to have caught", and she pulled the blanket more tightly around her. I found Beth and told her about the strange behaviour at first I think she thought I was joking but when she saw the look on my face she dashed upstairs. I saw that the kettle was on the range and steaming merrily I got out some bacon and eggs and made myself breakfast filling the teapot and sitting down at the kitchen table to eat it. I completed my meal which I really enjoyed poured another cup of tea and sitting back lit a fag I blew smoke in a plume into the air and watched as it hung in a blue cloud. Then I contemplated taking a trip to the Blackthorn Infirmary where I had been told to report by the doctors on the hospital ship when Beth came rushing into the kitchen saying. "Billy Boy run outside and send a boy for Dr Durkin you were right about Ma she has definitely had some kind of brainstorm or turn she seems to be living in a time before the war started she thinks that everyone is still here and worse that Frank and Charlie are coming home on leave from India."

I ran out of the house and saw the little Thomas boy coming down the street so I shouted him over and said. "Do you know Dr Durkin Tommy if so can you go and get him and tell him we need him urgent at 123 its Mrs Moffat." He was a handsome lad with brown hair and eyes that always had a mischievous twinkle in them and he replied. "Yes Sir I know him I will go and tell him right away", I gave him a couple of pennies and his face lit up then he turned and set off at the run down General Gordon Street with his shoes slapping hard against the wet pavement. A short time later Dr Durkin appeared in his trap climbed down and shook me by the hand saying. "Hello Billy Boy I'm glad to see you how are you faring I heard about you getting wounded would you like me to have a look at you after?" I replied. "I'm fine Dr and I am going to the infirmary shortly its Ma who's the trouble she is behaving rather strangely to say the least." Dr Durkin replied. "Right lets go and take a look at Mrs Moffat then and see if we can sort out what's wrong with her", and so we entered the house and he went straight upstairs to examine Ma. I made my way to the kitchen and had another mug of tea and a smoke I had just finished these when Dr Durkin and Beth came into the kitchen I could tell by the looks on their faces that things were none to good. Dr Durkin said to me. "I have examined Mrs Moffat and things are more serious than I thought her mental state of mind has deteriorated quite severely. It would appear that she is living under the misapprehension that this is 1913 and that everything here is fine and that there is no war being fought." He coughed and continued. "No doubt the strain of losing one son and having the other one confined to a military asylum has been to much for her mind to cope with she has become deranged. Also it will not have helped having you here Billy Boy I mean wounded and everything it must have fetched everything flooding back to her." This was too much for me after everything I had been through and I told him. "Do you seriously think this is my fault you old bloody quack I have had a belly full of people shirking and blaming other people. So don't you dare put the blame on me for what has happened to Ma because it has nothing to do with me?"

The look of shock on Dr Durkin's face was priceless al the colour had drained out of it and it looked like an old bag of suet but I was past caring anymore the whole world could go swing for me. After all when you had been through what I had been through at my age things just tended to snap and that was just what had happened here. The Dr who was still looking shocked stammered. "No that's not what I meant you have not caused this to happen it's everything over the last year that has built up until Mrs Moffat's mind has retreated to a happier time and is now living in that. By no means Billy Boy would I ever blame you and I am sorry if you thought I had." I apologised to both Dr Durkin and Beth but I didn't really mean it with Ma ending up like this I felt like I had been kicked in the bollocks by life again and I needed to get away. I heard Dr Durkin saying. "Of course after consulting with Beth we have decided that Mrs Moffat must be moved to a sanatorium until her mental state improves and that's what we have come to discuss with you." I was so tired and drained both mentally and physically that I replied. "Why come to me I'm nothing I can't decide anything if

you want to lock the old woman up in a loony bin like her son is so be it but don't expect me to have anything to do with it you and Beth sort it out." Dr Durkin looked uncomfortable again but I walked past him shrugging my shoulders at Beth as I left the kitchen and went upstairs. I got to my room and led down on the bed I had to get out of this house as it no longer felt like home and to tell the truth I was missing my mates and comrades. But even more than this I was missing Helen because my love had grown for her it was no longer an adolescent thing but a truly deep enduring love that had seen and nurtured me through hell and back.

A short time later I heard them come for Ma and I could here hear her shouting as they took her away but it didn't seem to matter anymore as my eyes closed and I drifted into sleep the nightmares began again. Gallipoli Charlie Slater, Walter Cole, Eli Woods, Johnny Grundy even the spy on Cairo station I woke up with a cold sweat covering my body sticking my clothes to me so I got up and turned on the light because I must have slept the day away as it was dark outside now. I then sat back on the bed with the pillows propping me up smoking a fag and I was just finishing it off when there was a knock on the door. I shouted. "I've told you Beth that I don't want anything to do with what's happened I just want to be left alone please." The knocking came again and I was now getting really angry when a voice said. "Its Rosie Billy Boy can I talk to you for a minute?" I sprang up from the bed and pulled the door open and there she was I gripped her in a fierce hug and tears coursed down my cheeks as she whispered. "Can you let me go love as I can't breathe and you are crushing my ribs?" I stood back and held her at arms length and saw that her cheeks were stained with tears also I invited her in and we sat side by side on the bed both a bit self conscious at first. It was now that I got my first good look at Rosie for nearly a year she was a lot thinner and she looked bone weary and I could see a look of illness in her eyes. When I first saw her I thought the light in the room was casting colour onto her but it was her skin itself that was a kind of yellow colour like she had jaundice. She had noticed me looking and said. "I see you have noticed my exotic colour it comes from the Liddite in the explosives it has sulphur in it that turns your skin yellow so they call us canaries."

All of a sudden she started coughing and kept on and then a great wad of phlegm must have come up because she spat it into her hanky. She looked at me and her eyes were bloodshot with the harsh coughing she had been doing and she joked. "Another legacy of working in munitions", and she smiled at me and I saw smears of blood on her teeth. She continued saying. "I was sorry to hear about Charlie Slater Helen told me." I replied. "Thanks Rosie I will try to tell you about it later on it's just that I get nightmares sometimes", I didn't mind telling Rosie this ass she was a true friend more of a sister to me than anything. Instead I said. "Tell me about this munitions job as its better to hear it first hand than from one of the girls and judging by that cough and the colour of your skin it is non to healthy." She replied. "Well I suppose I had better start at the beginning when all you lot went off to war I had Ma to look after and Beth as well because of the business with Frank and Charlie. But once they started getting batter there was not a lot for me to do round here", a cough racked her frame again. She continued. "But there was me Helen and Mabel and we used to enjoy each others company enormously but when Helen took up nursing and then moved to Manchester it all changed. I looked at what she was doing and thought I aught to be helping with the war effort as well", she took a sip of water from a glass by the bed. Then she said. "I had a friend Sally Pearson who had two brothers fighting in France and we talked about doing something to help win this war just like they were doing only in our own way. I told her about you fighting in Gallipoli and that you were like my brother and we also had lots of friends that were in the fighting as well", she stopped to catch her breath.

She carried on with her story again. "We wrote off to London and asked about any war work we might be able to do anywhere in the country and they told us about a factory just across town so we decided to give it a go." I stopped her and offered her a smoke she shook her head and smiled at me I lit up and she went on. "Well anyway we applied for a job and were excepted we had to go for a medical as we had to be physically fit and have perfect eyesight and we also had to be strong. Then

after that we had to provide four sets of different references and had to be British born of British parents.” She looked at me and I could see the affection she had for me shining in her eyes as she said. “Anyway we were accepted and told how vital our work was and how indispensable we were”, and at this she started laughing hysterically. I waited for her to calm down which took some time and then she went on saying. “They put me into a filling shed where they taught me to fill 18 pounder shells do you know we work ten hour days in that shed and it is not pleasant in fact it is dirty dangerous work.” She looked at me and her face was grim as she continued. “We work from eight in the morning till quarter to one and we get no break then after an hours lunch we work till half past six without a break and all this time we live with the fear of an explosion of which we have had a few which as killed a few of the lasses there.” A cough racked her again and she said. “I thought I was helping you and the other lads but all we are doing is lining the pockets of the bosses who cut corners and use condemned machines to make even more profit at the expense of our lives.”

She looked over at me again saying. “So what do you think about me doing my bit for you brave lads I have got this pretty coloured skin and the people like you and me are dying so that these war profiteers can make even more money to wallow in”, she broke down crying and I held her in my arms and comforted her. I thought to myself my poor Rosie what have they done to you but I knew that the same had happened to her as had to me and millions of others we had ended up in a war that we had all wanted at first before we even knew what war meant. Things had changed and I wouldn’t want anyone no matter what age to go through what Rosie and I had. We just sat for a while not talking and Rosie had her head resting on my shoulder while I continued to hold her and I said to her. “I take it that you know about what had happened to Ma I take it Beth has told you?” Rosie replied. “Yes she told me all about what happened but it really is the best place for her Billy Boy I mean Beth said she was deteriorating before her eyes getting worse by the minute. She told me to tell you she understands why you said what you did.” I replied. “I just couldn’t be bothered by any of it girl it was all too much for me on top of everything else.” Rosie kissed me on the cheek saying. “I will see you later I must go and talk to Beth and Mabel but we will have supper together later.” I replied. “I will look forward to it and please Rosie do one thing for me quit this job because I couldn’t bear to loose you as well”, she put a finger to her lips and went out and I could hear her coughing as she went down the corridor. I had many more chats with Rosie, Beth and Mabel who wanted me to reassure her that Bert would be alright and imploring me to look after him. But I had to disappoint her telling her that I couldn’t look after myself let alone anyone else. I then told her about Elijah Mack the last person I had looked after and who now only had half a face and was blind and that I never wanted that kind of responsibility again. She broke down crying when I told her this and I was sorry that I had to be brutal but then again war was brutal and the sooner she understood this the better it would be for her. Rosie took me to task calling me insensitive but I eventually made her see my point of view and she persuaded Mabel which put us on a better footing once more but I don’t think she will ever forgive me for what I said.

The time came for me to go and see the Doctor at the Infirmary as I had just received orders that as soon as I was fit enough I was to report back to the Battalion. This suited me down to the ground as I had gotten bored and depressed I loved the girls dearly but home had changed and even more so with Ma being gone. My home now was in the army and with the Battalion I missed my mates and the life which was structured and always busy so there was no time for depression or boredom. When I received the appointment I was over the moon and Rosie stated that she hadn’t seen me as happy since I had come home. So I set off with a spring in my step to go and catch the tram that would take me to the other side of town where the Infirmary sat in its own grounds. I got off the tram and walked towards the slightly gothic seeming red brick building part of which was Victorian but I was going to the new part of the Infirmary that had only been finished and opened in 1910 so it was only five years old I walked on up the driveway that led to the large double doors. I entered through these and found myself in the entrance hall of this round towered part of the building there were another three of these and each one had a glass cupola that covered it. Corridors led off this tower like spokes off a wheel and these led deeper into the building and light flooded down from

the cupola above. I read the signs on the walls that directed people to different wards and other places in the building then I saw the one I wanted this pointed to Dr Sullivan's clinic which was the one I wanted so I followed the arrows that pointed the way. I walked down green, white and brown tiled corridors which were permeated with the smell of ether and disinfectant till eventually I reached a room that had Dr Sullivan's clinic on the door. I knocked and entered I found myself in a waiting room with benches to sit on the walls were white tiled with a green border. There was a nurse sat at a desk in the corner of the room but there was no one else here at least that I could see. As I walked up to the desk the nurse looked up and said in a stern voice. "Can I help you?" I replied. "My name is William Lamb and I'm here to see Dr Sullivan about some kind of examination." She looked down at a large book that was open on her desk and then a frown creased her forehead as she asked. "Which Doctor referred you to us I don't seem to have any notification of your appointment?" I was as stumped as her until I thought just a minute I was dressed in civvies and so I said. "Sorry I should have said I am Pte Lamb of the Blackthorn Pals and I have been referred here by the army."

A smile spread over her daunting face softening it and making it much more human as she looked at the book again and said. "I've found you now please take a seat and I will go and see if the Dr Sullivan is ready for you", she stood up and walked across the room to a door on the far side she knocked on it and then walked in. I was left alone in the waiting room twiddling my thumbs and tapping my foot on the floor I thought about lighting a cigarette but couldn't be bothered all I wanted was to get this examination out of the way and to get back to the Battalion. The nurse returned saying. "You can go in and see Dr Sullivan now he is expecting you." I walked to the door knocked and entered then I heard a voice say. "Come right on in Pte Lamb or may I call you William?" I nodded at this as I looked round the room which was tiled like the waiting room and had a leather examination table in the centre of it. Then I noticed who the voice belonged to he was a tall almost skeletal man with a face like a cadaver and grey thinning hair but the most startling thing was his piercing blue eyes. He was washing his hands in a sink in the corner he finished and was wiping them as he said. "Welcome William I believe you are here for an examination to see if you are fit to return to duty again is that right?" I replied. "Yes Sir as far as I know anyway here I have a letter from the War Department", and I handed it to him after removing it from my pocket where it had gotten a little creased. He took it from me opening it and reading the contents then he handed it back to me saying. "Yes that all seems to be in order and I shall give you a thorough going over." He gestured with his hand as he said. "Would you please get undressed for me and then lie down on the examination table."

I did as I was asked and undressed down to my underwear I then led on the cold leather surface of the examination table and Dr Sullivan came across and said. "I would like you to sit up please." I sat up and he examined the scars on my shoulder and arm and then he examined the one on my chest he prodded at the scars some of which were still red and vivid. He then asked. "Do you get any pain from these wounds?" He checked my chest tapping it with his fingers and the listening with his stethoscope. I replied as truthfully as I could to his question saying. "I get a little pain now and again but nowhere near like what I used to have its more an aching." He then told me to remove my underwear and he then examined the wounds on my groin, lower back and leg asking. "What about these do you get any pain with them?" Once again I replied to him by saying. "I used to get quite a lot particularly from the groin wound and some stiffening in the leg but it's not too bad now there is hardly a twinge". He looked at me and said. "For a young chap you have more than your fair share of scars but I must say you have the luck of the devil because the groin wound would only have needed a little more force and it would have killed you. The rest of the shrapnel and bullet wounds are slight by comparison they probably hurt but they are really only superficial in medical terms", he laughed at this and his false teeth made a clicking sound like a demented land crab. He had another look at the wound on my shoulder and said to me. "What happened to this one it looks rather interesting?" I replied. "It turned septic and I got some blood poisoning they had to cut the infected bits out." Then I went on to explain how the bad diet flies and hygiene situation on the peninsula meant that no

wound would ever really heal properly and often got re-infected again and that I had just been lucky like he said.

He went on to probe the wound saying. "Looking at this you were lucky but it is alright just a bit of a mess you have a hollow in the tissue and muscle does this give you any kind of trouble?" I replied. "No not at all I never really think about it and sometimes forget that I was injured in this arm at all." He told me to put my underwear back on and then passed me a dressing gown telling me to put this on and to lie back on the table whose top he had raised. He went to the door and shouted the nurse when she appeared he said. "Ah nurse Stevens please take this young mans temperature height and weight and then enter them in his notes and show them to me." She stuck a thermometer in my mouth and told me to hold it under my tongue which I did but I must admit that the smell of antiseptic was beginning to make me feel ill. The nurse came back and removed the thermometer from my mouth shook it took the reading and noted it down she then said. "Please step over here", which I did and she measured my height. Next I stepped onto the large cast iron scales to be weighed which the nurse did by adding iron weights a few lbs and ounces at a time until the balancing arm reached the required place and then she read off my weight she wrote this down in my notes as well. She took the notes over to Dr Sullivan who was now sitting at a desk in the corner and then she left the room again no doubt to sit back at her desk outside. He came back over to where I was and said. "Cross your right leg over your left", he then hit me on the kneecap with a small hammer to test my reflexes then he did the same with the other leg. He pressed my tongue down and looked down my throat getting me to say ah at different points. He seemed happy enough with these procedures and told me it was alright to get dressed again now. I finished dressing thinking that there would be more questions or further tests but I was wrong it seemed like my examination was over. Dr Sullivan had retreated back to his desk and I walked over after I had finished dressing he said to me. "Could I have your papers please he then took a rubber stamp from a rack and stamped them 'Fit for Duty' he then returned them to me dismissing me with a quick. "You can go now." I asked. "Does this mean that I can return back to my unit?" He replied. "Certainly you may get a twinge of pain now and again but you are fit to return to active service so may I wish you good luck William". I thanked him not believing it was true.

I left the room feeling cock a hoop and said to the nurse on my way out. "He's a good is Dr Sullivan from a civvie that is I would recommend him to my mates anytime." She smiled broadly as she replied. "Oh Dr Sullivan is not a civilian he is army and all his patients are soldiers." Well blow me you could have knocked me down with a feather I hadn't seen that one coming at all no wonder I had been returned to duty not that I minded it was what I wanted. I left the Infirmary and went to catch the tram home where I could give them all the good news. I was really happy because like I said as much as I loved the girls I was getting bored and I missed the camaraderie of the Battalion and after all you can have too much of a good thing. I got home and told each one of the girls when I saw them they all took the news the same with sadness but also with a smile because they knew how much I wanted this. Rosie was tearful but wished me luck turning away to hide her tears I said to her that it could be quite awhile before I was recalled to the Battalion so she shouldn't fret too much. However I was wrong about the amount of time I had and just five days later a telegram arrived informing me that I should report to the Battalion at a transit camp on Salisbury plain. So once more I said goodbye to the people that I loved and to make matters worse I was going to spend a few days with Helen in Manchester which was out of the question now. I wrote telling her how sorry I was and that I would try to get leave so I could come and see her soon I told her how much I loved her and that she would always be in my heart.

The train thundered through the night taking me closer to my mates and further from Helen and the girls. I had both a tearful and a shock send off at Blackthorn station all the girls were there and they each gave me a small present for the journey. Beth had given me a couple of bottles of beer Mabel had supplied me with cigarettes and Rosie had made me sandwiches to keep me going. I

kissed Beth and Mabel goodbye and they both stepped back then it was Rosie's turn and she stepped up and held onto me for dear life. She whispered in my ear. "You do know that I love you William Lamb don't you?" I replied. "Of course I do and I love you your like my sister and always will be." She looked into my eyes shaking her head and saying. "I don't mean as brother and sister I mean as a man and woman should love each other." I was totally taken back by this disclosure not to mention embarrassed as I stuttered. "But you know I love Helen and she is the only person in the world for me don't you?" She replied. "Yes I know and I know you don't have the same feelings for me but I cant help the way that I feel you must believe that. Also I would never hurt Helen knowingly for the world she is like a sister and that is why I have never told you this before or tried to take it further although I have wanted to." I looked at my sweet Rosie and wondered how I could have been so blind not to see what was in front of me but I was mad at her for telling me this now as I was returning to the Battalion. I said to her. "You must know that I would never leave Helen or cheat on her in anyway so why drop this bombshell now tell me why you have decided to reveal this now?" She sobbed as she told me. "I just needed to tell you before you went away again and I know I stand no chance of happiness with you but I always know that my feelings will never alter." I mean what could I say to this I had known her since I first came to Blackthorn and there was a strong bond between us and I had to admit that if I had not met Helen then Rosie and I would probably have ended up together.

I pushed her out to arms length saying. "As long as you understand that nothing can happen between us and that I cant love you in that way then its alright I suppose I should be flattered and I will always love you like a brother." The tears streamed down her face and ran off the end of her small upturned nose and down her lips and she kissed me hard on the mouth and I tasted the saltiness of her tears. Then she pulled back and said. "God keep you Billy Boy and always remember there was another one who loved you with all her heart and who could not live if anything happened to you." I smiled as I replied. "Goodbye Rosie old girl keep your chin up and get the hell out of that munitions factory because I couldn't bear to think of anything happening to you either. She stepped back and stood with Beth and Mabel who looked concerned by her behaviour as I boarded the train. A soldier from another unit shouted. "Bloody hell mate you're a greedy sod aint you three women pining for you when most of us have to make do with one", and he grinned at me. I found a compartment and slung what little kit I had inside it I sat down and made myself comfortable as I closed my eyes thinking about the declaration of love that Rosie had just made and wondering where the fucking hell it had come from. It was hard to think of anything unless Rosie was ill and that's why she had revealed her secret. Then again I was in a quandary about whether to tell Helen about what had happened I knew they were close, would she think that I was making it up or trying to make her jealous?" I decided that for the moment and for everyone's peace of mind that I would not bother Helen with this information after all it was her I loved and always would do. The train rattled on through the night and I tried to sleep but I couldn't I had already eaten my sandwiches which had seemed to stick in my throat at every bite. However I had done better with the beer and fags which I was chain smoking causing a fug in the compartment like a North Sea fog as the train rattled on through the night taking its occupants ever onward to their destinations.

I disembarked at a small railway station on Salisbury plain and got a lift from a farmer to a spot close to the camp. I walked through the gates of the camp and reported to the guard house there was a soldier on duty that I didn't know and I thought he must be a replacement as I said. "Pte Lamb reporting back after being on convalescent leave", and I pulled my orders from my pocket and put them on the counter. The soldier moved to look at my paperwork when a voice said. "I will see to this you get about your duties." I looked to my right as the voice spoke again saying. "Bloody hell Billy Boy you're a sight for sore eyes and no mistake." I saw that it was Cpl Kenny grinning fit to bust as I said. "Hello Tom how are you its good to see you too, did anyone else make it out that weren't wounded after that last attack?" He looked me straight in the eye and replied. "Not so many lad about thirty of us and twenty wounded by the time the attack was called off." He looked glum so I changed the subject saying. "What are things like here are they the same as they were at

Weatherington or a little better or worse?" He replied. "Its not to bad here but the training as been stepped up as everyone keeps taking about some big push that's going to happen somewhere or other." He took my orders off the counter looked through them noted something down in the ledger on the desk and then said. "You better get off and report to Beer Company orderly room and let them know your here otherwise they will be posting you AWOL and that's a shooting offence", he laughed as he said this to show me he was joking still I though the is right I better get off. I told him that I would catch him later and then I walked out of the guard room and down the road following the signs for Beer Company.

Our lines were at the bottom end of the camp and I got to the orderly room and walked in then blow me the first person I saw was George Drew I burst out laughing saying. "What the hell have they got you working in here for I didn't know you could write?" He came out from behind the desk like a 'Whirling Dervish' throwing his arms round me and hugging me. "Billy Boy its good to see you but your looking well mate oh by the way I was sorry about Elijah and about Ma Moffat as well. He stood back and I saw the second stripe on his sleeve so I said. "Bloody hell they must be handing them out with bully beef tins if you've got another one", and I grinned at him. He replied. "Don't worry pal you will only have to salute me five or six times a day I won't ask for anymore in case you become tired." I told him. "You will be lucky George Drew the only thing I would salute you with is the farts from my arse." Then I heard a voice say. "I recognise that squeaky little voice it could only belong to one Pte Lamb." I watched as Ted Wallace walked into the orderly room and I noticed like George he had been made up to Colour Sergeant he acme over to me and we shook hands saying. "How are you Billy Boy I am glad you made it in one piece because there aren't many of us 'White Slaves of Gallipoli' left these days? I was worried I can tell you when they fetched Elijah and you in that night there was blood all over the two of you and I thought you were both goners." He sat on the corner of the desk and continued. "How is Elijah by the way we all hoe he is alright?" I replied. "Oh he is right as rain for someone who is blind and only has half a face and who wont let his wife see him because he is to ashamed." Ted Wallace looked at me recognising the anger in my voice as he said. "I know lad and his friends that are left are very sorry about it but it could happen to anyone of us and you know that."

Of course he was right even if I did hate him for saying it was all a game of chance if you stood on the right you would be alright if you bent down at the right time the bullet would miss you and hit some other poor mug it was all just fate. I heard Ted say. "What about your wounds Billy Boy you're not still in pain from them are you?" So I said to him and George. "No they don't hurt so much now the Doctors took a load of shrapnel out of me and two bullets but most of the iron hadn't done too much damage I was pretty lucky." Ted replied. "Just stay that lucky and surviving this war will be a piece of piss." Anyway enough of this the C.S.M will want to see you so come on we left the orderly room and walked along the veranda to the C.S.M.s office Ted knocked at the door and I heard a familiar voice say. "Come in." C.S.M Dombly looked up from his desk as we entered I marched up and stood to attention in front of him as he said. "Pte Lamb nice of you to rejoin our little band, I hope you've have had a nice rest because you will be working harder than you have ever done now that you are back here with your comrades." My eyes raised a bit at this I wasn't expecting the prodigal son routine but I thought that he might have been at least a little happy about my return. He turned to Ted Wallace saying. "What do you think Colour Sergeant should we put this shirker to work straight away or maybe we should let him ease his way back in what do you think?" Ted Wallace replied. "I would get him working straight away Sir then he can make up for some of the time he's been away skiving." I looked at them askance and couldn't believe what they were saying I mean although they were a lot older than me and of higher rank I still regarded them as friends but the I thought how wrong could I be. Then the C.S.M said. "Alright Ted leave him here with me I will sort him out and put him back on the straight and narrow." Ted Wallace left the office and I stood there confused and a little scared because I had no idea what I had done that would explain a welcome like this.

The C.S.M said to me in that soft voice of his. "Sit down Billy Boy and take the weight off your feet for a while", as I sat I saw the smile on his face. Relief surged through me as I realised that Ted Wallace and he had been playing with me it had all been a joke on their part and was I glad of that. He continued. "Sorry about the piss take lad but we but we couldn't resist it still I hope you are alright and that your wounds are healed now?" I replied. "Thank you Sir I am fine now just glad to be back with the Battalion." He said. "Good because I can tell you that your friends were worried when you were carried off to the aid tent after the last attack and that included Captain Melstone, Major Danby and even me." I don't know what it was maybe my age or maybe because I had been living on my nerves so long but what he had said touched me to the core the thought that the Officers thought highly of me was too much at the moment and I broke down. I managed to pull myself together but I was bitterly ashamed that I had broken down in front of a friend and brave man Like the C.S.M. He waited and then said. "Listen to what I am saying to you it's alright for any man to sob if he's been through what we have and at your age I wouldn't expect anything else so don't be ashamed men a lot older than you would have broken down a long time before now. I will also tell you that I am proud of the way you have handled things in some of the worst situations I have ever seen." I looked up at him and knew that he was a true friend even with all his service and rank and that he had always had my best interest at heart even when I wouldn't listen to him.

I looked into the careworn face as he continued saying. "I was sorry to hear about Elsie Moffat and when I get leave I will try to see her and I will see the girls as well I will also have to see Elijah Mack and his family." We talked a bit longer about things at home and about our time on the peninsula which did me good because I could finally talk to someone who had been there and who knew what it was like but then it was time for me to go. I stood up to leave when the C.S.M said. "Just a minute lad take this chit to the stores tomorrow and get your kit replaced also see the Paymaster about your outstanding pay", and he handed me a chit. I thanked him as he stood up saying. "Right then get yourself off to your billet and get some rest you must be fairly tired what with travelling and such and here is another chit it allows you an extra day off to get your kit together and sort yourself out with the various paperwork." I thanked him again for all his help then turned and made my way to our sections hut where I dumped the small amount of kit I had I wasn't feeling all that hungry so I thought that I would just lay back on my bunk for a bit and wait for the lads to come back from wherever they had gone. But I must have been more tired than I thought because in seconds of my head touching the pillow I was in a dead sleep so I didn't see the lads when they returned neither did I see who covered me with a blanket.

I awoke the next morning feeling better than I had for a while I spoke to Frank Lord then we went and got washed and shaved and set off to have breakfast. Frank was one of the only ones who hadn't asked me how I felt and I was grateful for that instead he said. "I'm glad your back Billy Boy it was bad enough when we were all split up when you lot went off to Gallipoli but then when we heard about the dead and wounded it was even worse." I replied by saying to him. "How's Jimmy doing is he alright I would imagine that he's on convalescent leave now has he wrote to you?" Frank replied. "Oh Jimmy's in hospital still and he will be there for quite a while yet the thing is that he will never walk again my brothers a cripple." I was horrified and didn't know what to say it was bad enough that Frank had lost one brother but now to have one that was crippled was a bloody nightmare. Frank spoke again saying. "Of course it is worse for my Mum I mean losing Mickey was a terrible blow but this news about Jimmy has crushed her and she has not stopped crying since she found out. I must admit and I know it sounds selfish and not what's expected but I couldn't wait to get back off leave to the Battalion." I replied. "Don't worry about it Frank I was the same I couldn't wait to get back here and see my mates no one at home understands so there is no shame in wanting to be here with your comrades." We reached the cookhouse and got our breakfast we had porridge with bread and jam and hot sweet tea and I must admit that it filled a hole and went down a treat. We had started walking back to the hut the morning was cold but had that smell of freshness about it as we walked Frank asked. "Did you see anything of Elijah when you were at home?" I replied. "He wouldn't see me or anyone I mean Christ he wouldn't even see his wife." Frank shook his head in

disbelief before saying. "I do hope he gets better soon I mean he was such a good bloke and he kept us all together even through the bad times I would hate to think he will be like that for ever." We arrived back at the hut but it was in a state of chaos and the blokes had either took off for breakfast or like George they were trying to desperately get dressed and make their way to the wash house and latrines.

Later on when everyone had returned they all disappeared on fatigues and working parties so I went off to the stores with my chit and was issued with my full kit in replacement for what I had lost. I packed it into my kitbag and then took it back to the hut where I put it away then I made my way to the armoury to be issued with a new weapon because I was a designated marksman I was once again issued with an orthoptic sight attached to it. I then returned to the hut I then had to go off to get my paperwork sorted at headquarters after this I returned and waited for the lads to come back for dinner. That night George and I talked about the situation at home about Ma and what was happening and how the girls were and it was good to have someone else to share the burden with. Then Bert came over and asked me about Mabel I told him she was fine and missing him however I didn't tell him about her asking me to look after him I was happy because I was back in the bosom of my platoon with my mates and it was as if I had never been away. While we were here on Salisbury plain the training really intensified the route marches got longer and the whole physical training side was stepped up as well as firing practice and tactical problems bayonet drill and obviously fatigues and working parties. The days flew by telescoping themselves into what seemed a total whirl and it was quite easy to lose track of time. I received a letter from Helen in it she informed me that Rosie had taken sick and that she had obtained some leave and was going to look after her I was very concerned but knew that she couldn't be in better hands. I wrote back that night saying that I hoped she was better soon and that I knew Helen would take care of her and I again told Helen how much I loved her. Then I wrote a letter to Rosie telling her that she had better get better soon and that I would pray for her and I sent her my love.

The training kept up in its intensity but to tell the truth it became just a bit boring as did the fatigues and working parties though I wouldn't complain after being stuck at home like I was before coming here. It was the 1st of December when George ran hell for leather into our hut he was out of breath and his face was the colour of a ripe tomato. Frank shouted. "You want to slow down old son you look like you are ready to have a heart attack." Now George was trying to catch his breath and talk at the same time so that all we got were gasps and a mess of jumbled words that we couldn't understand. Bert walked across to where George was bent double and proceeded to pound him on the back rather vigorously in my eyes. I know he was trying to help but all he achieved really was to nearly smash George's ribs in. I thought I better have a word and so I said. "Give the bloke some room and Bert stop pounding him on the back before you kill him or break his ribs and you George just take your time get your breath back and then tell us what happened. At last he pulled himself together then he gave a last wheeze saying. "Ah that's better bloody hell lads you will never guess what I've just found out?" We were all looking at George waiting for an answer when Bert shouted. "Don't tell me more fucking fatigues and working parties I hate the bloody things?" George shot him a withering look and replied. "No you idiot listen to what I'm saying I was in the Company office like I usually am." Frank butted in saying. "Yes we know trust you to get a cushy job away from all the fatigues and proper work." George shushed him and said do you want to hear this shattering news or what?" I was at the end of my tether and so replied. "Fucking hell George, just get on with it and stop wittering on like a pillock and tell us what you know and stop bugging about." He looked very insulted and hurt by what we had said but the information he had was burning a hole in his brain and he could no longer contain it he had to tell someone or he would explode.

He looked at us all stood there waiting expectantly and then continued with his tale. "Like I said I was standing in the office when all hell breaks loose all Battalion Officers are being called to a meeting and signals are flying about like confetti. Cyclostet copies of orders are being drafted and then and then I get an order that has just come to us from Battalion H.Q. and it says", and here he

began to drag things out again building up the suspense until I could have killed him. But before I could Frank screeched out. “Well then knob-head what did this order say before I’m compelled to chastise you severely and punch you in the face.” George shot a look of triumph at us as he said. “The Battalion is to leave immediately for France what do you think of my news now then worth waiting for wasn’t it?” There was now sheer pandemonium and delight in our hut lads were cheering slapping each other on the back play fights had broken out and now people from other huts were packing into ours to see what was going on. The news by this time had reached most of the camp and we could hear the cheering and singing coming from them as our celebration died down. There was a lot to do however and this time there would be no advance party we were moving in full Battalion order.

PART FOUR

FRANCE

DEC 1915 JULY 1916

Chapter Twelve

The battalion moved out and entrained at Salisbury railway station and set off for the crossing destinations the majority of the Battalion would cross for France by way of Folkestone-Boulogne. However our platoon had been volunteered to accompany the Battalion transport which was going via Southampton-Le Havre so once again after a trip on the G.W.R. railway we found ourselves back at Southampton where we joined the transport ship 'Archimedes'. We sailed for France and arrived at Le Havre in the early hours of the following morning we then had to wait to dock and this was achieved just after first light. The ship was unloaded and we helped the signaller's stretcher bearer's office staff and machine gunners who usually along with the service troops accompanied the Btn transport. We found ourselves unloading allsorts of kit as well as the animal's horses, mules, then there were limbers and the field kitchens along with all the rest of the supplies and kit we would need. We lined up in ranks dressing off under the watchful eyes of the Provost Corpsmen our transport had already set off making for the railway station a Rail Transport Officer rode up on his horse. He spoke to Captain Melstone who was in charge and told him to move us off at that moment a horse coming past on the opposite side slipped on the wet cobbles and shied this in turn upset his horse and it took him all his time to control the beast and stop himself being unseated. This cheered us up and we were still laughing when we marched off down the quay there were few locals around here but there were certainly plenty of British and Empire soldiers around.

We marched through the town making for the railway station and marshalling yards I had no idea why we did this as trains could pull up right on the quay. As we marched through the town there were a few girls who seemed glad to see us and the lads didn't need much encouragement to respond. There were however a few Frenchmen who being exempt from military service by reason of having reserved occupations seemed to take exception at this and began to shout at us as we marched by. Marching on we passed other groups old men and children and women dressed all in black

looking like a coven of ravens watching us as we went by they had pinched and sallow faces and looked like they had the weight of the world on their shoulders. They looked at us as though to say you are as much to blame as the Germans for what is happening to our country. For in this second year of the war France was being bled dry of its manpower and a lot of these young women were widows already and they certainly wouldn't be the last by a long way. We arrived at the station and Captain Melstone went off to find a RTO we stood in our ranks with our kit piled and were given permission to stand easy and smoke if we wished. Bert said. "Did you see the faces on some of those women bloody hell their stares were colder than a polar bears chuff I could well do without that when I have come here to help them." Frank looked at him and replied. "You would probably feel the same if you had lost your husband at their age it is no bloody joke. George turned to me saying. "Your quite Billy Boy what do you think about yon women?" I turned to him and said. "I don't give a shit they can please themselves they are not the only ones that have lost loved ones in this war and they certainly won't be the last." Everyone went quite as this sank in I don't know why I was being such a bastard with my mates just that my groin wound was playing up and I was running a slight fever. I had some aspirin from the medics who were also travelling with us and I now washed a couple down with some water from my bottle.

After about a quarter of an hour Captain Melstone came back with a rather harassed looking RTO and Colour Sergeant Wallace shouted. "Attention, listen to what the Captain has to say and keep it quite", he saluted the Captain and stepped back. Captain Melstone said. "Thank you Colour Sergeant Wallace. Right lads what's happening is this there is no transport for us today", he shot a rather withering look at the young Lieutenant in charge of transport. He continued saying. "We will spending the night under canvas at a camp on the esplanade at the top of the town and a train will be here tomorrow to take us and other troops further on so we wont have long to wait." There was a groan from the ranks and the Captain looked round us all then said. "This is not all the RTO's fault we received the wrong orders in England because we should have been at a large base at Entaples for two weeks training. Instead we are here but the good news is that the Battalion is needed at the front right away and because of our experience at Gallipoli it has been deemed that we do not need the training and so we will move directly to the front", at this news a cheer went up from the ranks which was soon quietened by the NCOs. The Captain turned to a Lieutenant by the name of Sullivan and said. "Right lets get the chaps on their way and get them bedded down for the night and make sure they also get a hot meal inside them." I thought thank god for Officers of the calibre of Captain Melstone who always thought about the men. We formed up again in three ranks and we were soon on our way to the nights bivouac and we sang as we marched along. We spent a very pleasant night under canvas well apart from the wind and rain that is but the hot meal we received left us all in high spirits. A few of the lad's were off in the dark kissing some of the local girls who had climbed the hill and the wire to see our boys. We could hear them giggling and talking pretty late into the night as could the Provost Company soldiers who quickly kicked the girls out of the camp. I am sure they would have charged our lads with something had we not been going to the front tomorrow and had not Captain Melstone stepped in and said he would take care of things.

We were down at the railway station early the following morning we had breakfast around five and marched down to the station about six and then we spent the next three hours waiting for the train to arrive. Eventually into the station pulled the longest train I or most of the lads had ever seen it was huge in length. There must have been about thirty odd wagons of different types making up the train and the Battalion transport was loaded on board the train stopped and we were shown our transport and you could hear the groans all over the place. For the Officers as usual got to ride in the luxury of first class carriages while we would have to pile aboard cattle trucks with a little straw scattered on the floor. Captain Melstone came along with Lieutenant Sullivan so Nobby Clarke said. "Same deal as in Egypt then Sir some people travel in comfort while the rest of us get to act as cattle again", he was only saying what everyone else was thinking but I thought bloody hell Nobby you will be on a fizzer for this. But to give the Captain and Lieutenant their due they looked most embarrassed and sheepish about the situation as the Captain said. "Sorry about this lad's but you

have been in the army long enough now to know how things work.” He grinned at us as he continued saying. “Anyway come along now get on board were due to depart soon and we don’t want to be holding up the war after all it’s taken us a long time to get here.” Frank said. “Just a minute Sir the train’s only part full, aren’t we going to fill it up before we leave?” The Captain replied. “We will fill the train further up the line where I may say even now large numbers of men and equipment are waiting for us to turn up so chop, chop lets get on board and get moving.”

The Officers set off for their comfortable carriages while we piled on board the cattle trucks leaving the doors open at the moment for fresh air and so we could see the countryside. When we sat down we found out that the floor of the trucks under the straw was made up of planks set about an inch apart. This must have been so they could sluice them out after they had transported the cattle however for us they posed the problem of letting draughts blow up through them. We countered this by spreading our groundsheet over the floor thus cutting the draughts down to a minimum. With the clashing together of the couplings and buffers and a couple of jerks that rattled the trucks then a loud hiss of escaping steam as an accompaniment we set off for the front. As we pulled away the grins on the lads faces said everything this is where we wanted to be this is what most of us had joined up for not to fight the Turks but to fight the Germans who had started this war. The train rolled on out of the station and we hung out of the doors trying to get our first look at the French countryside that we had come to fight for. As the train thundered on it would stop every now and again to pick up men and supplies we were travelling through Upper Normandy which was a low lying region of France. Frank looked out and then said. “Of course we have been here before.” Both Bert and George shouted. “What the bloody hell are you on about none of us has ever set foot in France let alone here.” Frank turned and looked at them with a pained expression on his face saying. “I didn’t mean us personally I mean the English because this is where the ‘Hundred Years War’ was fought.” Gorge said. “You meant to say they had a war that lasted a hundred years”, his face looked a picture of disbelief as he said this. Frank laughed and then went on. “I take it that you have never heard of ‘Agincourt’ you know Henry V”, George just looked at him puzzled with his mouth open like the village idiot. It was Bert who replied. “Of course I’ve heard of it so that was round here was it?” Frank turned to him saying. “A bit further on actually but it was part of the ‘Hundred Years War’ that I just mentioned.” Bert persisted with his questions. “Did we invade this place or what?” Frank by this time was getting a little exasperated at our lack of historical knowledge so he just said. “Yes we invaded France and stuck around for quite a while and we are passing through a part of France that the armies where in does that satisfy you?” Things went quite after this and I am sure Frank was sorry he had opened his mouth we chugged along and we looked out on fields with flax and cereals growing in them. There were lots of cow herds about and the soil looked rich and the grass lush and sweet there were forests and some quite steep wide ravines as we passed by them but we were not destined to rattle along for much longer.

Even as we watched we were shunted off into a siding to let ammunition trains clank and screech past us so we used this time to stretch our legs and take care of any latrine needs we had. The closer to the front we got the more hold ups we encountered so at some of these stops we would gather wood and build fires shoving billy cans on them and brewing up. We even warmed our food up over them which made a real change to the dry rations we had been eating. It was cold as we rolled along with the doors open but if we shut them the air soon got foul with tobacco smoke and the smell of unwashed and wet uniforms and bodies. Of course we had no stoves in our cattle trucks unlike the Officers who were in warm comfortable carriages. We carried on towards Picardy we had already passed through Harfleur and followed the Seine valley towards Rouen. We pulled in here and Frank informed us that it was one of the busiest of the French river ports and we could see a lot of the ocean going vessels already building up here. Once again we were shunted into a siding and as we were stood around smoking a French wheel tapper came along testing the wheels so we asked him if he spoke English and he told us a little so we asked him what Rouen was famous for and he replied. “Why the Cathedral Monsieur it is truly a gothic representation of magnificence I would advise you to visit it if you have the time.” We laughed at this for we knew that we wouldn’t have

the time and might move off at any minute. Nobby Clarke said. "Is that it a bloody Cathedral?" The Frenchman replied. "Oui is that not enough what more would you have?" Nobby even more exasperated shook his head saying. "That's not what I mean how does your town make a living and don't tell me through the bloody Cathedral?" The wheel tapper shrugged and said. "Ah we make the best clothing, textiles and paper in France Monsieur's." We would have liked to have heard more about the place but he went on his way tapping the wheels on every wagon and carriage. When the train could eventually move we did near enough a right angle turn and joined the railway heading further into Picardy we passed through Forges-le-Eaux on our way to Amiens and the Somme area. On and on we travelled and we were still shunted into sidings when the ammunition trains came along. The landscape of Picardy was different from Normandy and the train slowed down to nearly a crawl so to counter the boredom we played cards and crown and anchor by candlelight when the doors were closed.

At other times we would sing our favourite songs until our throats were sore 'Dolly Grey', 'Pack up your troubles', 'If you were the only girl in the world', 'Tipperary' and 'Keep the home fires burning, the good songs that we knew by heart. We tried to sleep or just dozed packed together like puppies in a litter leaning on each other or lying down across each others calves or thighs tired and bone weary from the journey. On and on the train went the rattle clack of its wheels lulling us into a trance like state until the old engine came to an incline or hill and then it would wheeze and snort like an old asthmatic. Our train pulled into a siding again this time to let a hospital train thunder by we could see little of the injured as it passed because the blinds were pulled down but we knew what kind of suffering would be going on behind them. We had jumped down stretching our legs and getting some air and we all stood there scratching like a pack of hound dogs. George said. "What the hells going on I can't stop scratching?" Ted Wallace replied. "Lice and fleas old son that's why you're scratching the straw in the wagons is full of the little perishers." He was absolutely right every wagon was lousy and in turn every one of us was as well Ted said. "If I was you I would kill them now while their young otherwise they will be inviting their relatives along to dine on you as well", and he moved off chuckling to check on the other lads. Bert remarked "This is a bag of shit cooped up in these wagons going nowhere fast and now we have to put up with being eaten alive. Meanwhile the Officers drink Champaign sitting nice and pretty in first class accommodation it's enough to make you weep." As we moved north the weather became colder and there was sleet and snow flying about outside, and the wagon doors were closed most of the time now as we huddled together inside to keep warm. There were more hold ups and every time we moved off again the buffers would crash together hard enough to rattle your teeth and make your ears ring and the coupling chains would jangle and clank as they swayed when the engine pulled off. Then as we got going the wheels would start their steady thrumming as the speed of the train picked up moving ever onwards to our final destination.

Further and further we moved through Picardy and we could now see lots of ponds and low lying rivers with reeds and willow growing in them and the dyke's criss crossed the landscape. Also we began to see women working in the fields of potatoes and beetroot, they were dressed in black skirts tucked up showing there petticoats and bare legs. This got more than a few cheers from the lads when the doors were opened for our obligatory fresh air break there were also a fair amount of lewd comments that I don't think would have gone down well if the women knew what they meant. The faces of the older women looked brown in the winter sun and these wore thick woollen stockings and big boots as they worked in the fields. The train took us past rows of poplars that stood like sentries on the wayside lanes and grass covered canal banks as we moved towards the Somme River. Once again the landscape changed and we began to see cottages and farmhouses that had been shelled and sometimes we would pass entire villages that had been devastated. We saw roofs that had been blown in or sometimes there would only be a couple of outside walls left standing there looking like rotted teeth in the landscape. The trees were the same vast swathes had been cut through woods and forests as though a scythe had been used to cut its way into them. All that was left was the stumps or shattered trunks of the trees leaving an eerie looking landscape that did not look very

inviting. Eventually we detrained at Amiens the provincial capital of Picardy that also had a famous Cathedral, at the moment there were no orders for us and so we ended up spending the night sleeping on the streets with the Battalion transport with hundreds of other soldiers who were waiting for orders as well.

The following morning we moved through the city carrying our kit and marching behind the transport you could feel a buzz of excitement around the city that seemed to get to you. Also the place was packed and not just with soldiers there were sleek good looking women on the streets and large bosomed country women selling their produce. There were businessmen some of who were shady to say the least and farmers with faces like nutmegs from a lifetime of working in the open air and sun walking about. We watched the British and French soldiers who passed us and French Generals covered in gold braid all milling about and waiting like the rest of us. There were more Staff Officers than I had ever seen in one place and who came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. But all of them were well fed and riding sleek horses and they were accompanied by cavalry troopers immaculately attired right down to the polished ammunition bandoliers that were strapped across their chests. The more senior would have staff cars and you could tell the ones at the very top because they would be driven around in Rolls Royce's. We moved on and we could now see the spire of the Cathedral upright above the uneven roof tops around it lifting itself up to heaven as though pointing the way. We had our breakfast at a field kitchen that had been set up in a square near the Cathedral and then we queued up to wash and shave at a communal pump on the other side of the square attached to a horse trough. The buildings round here were all sandbagged and some of them looked like they had taken a fair amount of punishment over time. Our transport was parked with other horse drawn wagons under the trees and we watched as the horses pawed the ground nervously. There were lorries and cavalry big guns and small guns supplies and men all moving through Amiens on their way to the front or supply dumps behind the front lines. Always though you could hear the tramping of boots, the rattle of curb chains, the creak of harness and the clatter and rumble of wheels that never stopped day or night.

As we waited for our orders to move a large contingent of cavalry rode by row after row of sleek well fed horses with the cavalymen looking down on us from on high. We could see their rifles hanging down from the rear of their saddles encased in holsters and their scabbard sabres hanging down the front near their knees waiting to be drawn when they charged. Behind these came a large phalanx of Indian lancers with their lances pointing at the sky like fingers and with their pennants gaily fluttering in the breeze their heads were covered by khaki turbans. As we watched them ride past Bert said. "What good are the bloody cavalry fucking set of bum boy's the only things they are good for is chasing bloody foxes their useless for modern warfare." Gorge asked. "Well what the hell are they doing here then?" A voice shouted. "Because all the senior Generals in charge are all ex cavalymen and that includes Haig now you know why the horse soldiers are here."

Our orders finally came through and at last we marched off on the long road to Albert the Battalion transport following us and the rain teeming down. As we got further along the road the rain petered out and so we stopped in a little village and ate our dry rations. We looked the village over as we munched our meal we could see how popular we were by the way the villagers locked themselves away in their houses. We marched on for most of the day and at times we were forced to halt so that convoys of artillery pieces and horse drawn supply wagons could pass us on their way to the front. At times we would have to stop to let the cavalry leap-frog us on their way forward and we would show what we thought of them by jeering as we stood beside the road trying to ease the aches and pains in our arms and legs. I noticed that the road was a kaleidoscope of the British Empire for along it marched units of Australians, South Africans, New Zealanders and Canadians as well as Indian troops and many more who had enlisted to defend the Mother Country. Then there were the British units Irish, Scots and Welsh men from every county Lancashire, Yorkshire, Northumberland the Midlands and Home Counties and the PALS Battalions like ours all on their way to the front. As we

marched along we could see in the fields on the side of the road lots of men and tents these were the cavalry lines they would move closer to the front when the attack was ready to start.

The road to Albert was now as straight as a dye and was packed with allsorts of transport there were horse drawn supply wagons and Crossley lorries all jammed nose to tail and waiting to move a few yards further forward. We saw the Indian muleteers again with their charges huge strings of mules loaded with supplies moving ever forward as on the opposite side of the road empty mule trains returned to the supply dumps to pick up more loads we could see that their bellies and legs were caked with the white chalky mud of this region. In the fields we passed now there was Battery after Battery of artillery both light and heavy and near then huge piles of shells were being stacked in dumps. Now the countryside changed there were green and brown hills in the distance on top of which little copses of trees grew we also noticed that the houses and villages along this stretch had not been touched by the war. The site of the trenches we were heading for hadn't changed much since 1914 and stretched from Switzerland to the North Sea coast where we faced the Germans across a small strip of No Mans Land or a salient that pushed forward in a bulge into the opposite territory. Later on we reached Albert and we marched into it under a railway arch that led into the town the further in we got the more we could see that it had taken a real pasting from artillery fire. There were smashed buildings everywhere and broken red brick chimney stacks reached like pointing fingers to the sky nearly the whole of the town had been demolished houses shops schools everything destroyed. The ruined tower of the Basilica of Notre Dame de Brebières stood out like a sentry and a hundred feet above our heads the Madonna or 'Lady of the Limp' as she was known held out her precious child over the square and devastation below as though to say look what you are doing. We heard that a shell had hit the tower in 1915 and that French engineers had secured the statue at right angles to the building and the blessed virgin looked as though she would come crashing down to earth at any moment. There was a superstition that claimed if the Madonna fell then the war would be lost but as long as she stayed in place up there then we would be granted victory.

We marched on past more desolation factories and more dwellings were just piles of rubble with weeds and splintered wood sticking out of them. Out of the town we went under the blind gaze of the Madonna and child then we took the northern road that led onto the Rue de Bapaume. Just north of this it was joined by a road from the south we marched on bowed by the weight of our equipment and with sweat running down our faces and backs. Our khaki uniforms were stained where our straps had rubbed them and the entrenching tools had chaffed our skin raw where they hung down. We moved along through the ruins of Albert then out over the railway line on the far side of the town and as we marched along we saw the transport move another couple of inches. Marching on we passed through Querriue a small village on one of the River Somme's tributaries this was a base for the Staff and packed with troops and equipment but we soon left this behind as went on our way. As we progressed through the countryside Dispatch Riders roared up and down the road and verges carrying their all important orders and messages on their motorcycles. As dusk and then finally dark fell the Military Police with shaded torches chivvied everyone along like demented sheepdogs. This was where the new 4th Army had set up its stall and we wound up a hill and past Aveluy Woods as we marched along the mud and dung filled road. The wind and rain blowing and coming down soaking us and by this time we were all tired and hungry and more than a little pissed off. We passed through villages shut up tight for the night where not even a cat or dog stirred and were the silence was an almost a visible thing in the dark night.

We lurched along now weighed down with our equipment our rifles slung by our sides and our boots echoing off the pave. It was pitch black and you had to keep your eye on the man in front of you or you would collide with the pack on his back when we came to a halt. Around us we could hear the creaking of harness and the rattle of curb chains and smell the horsey smell that marked either a supply of artillery unit that had stopped beside the road. Every now and again we would see a shielded light were some exasperated Officer tried to check his map and find out where his unit was.

As we continued forward we could see light flickering on the horizon and on the wind we could hear the crump of shells exploding and we knew we were getting close to the front line. We could also see a few shell holes in the ground around us and a cottage on our right was just a shell of a building with a collapsed roof. On and on we progressed closer to the front the dark and the fatigue now beginning to affect us all so that you just put one foot in front of the other and hoped that soon we would stop. I hooked my thumbs into the sixty pound pack I was carrying and eased my poor aching shoulders and the muscles that were now burning and sore from the rubbing of the straps. As we marched along we could see other poor buggers who hadn't made it collapsed on the side of the road led not moving from sheer exhaustion. If they were lucky a mate would come back and find them and show them the way when they recovered if not then they would be by themselves lost and this could be very dangerous for if you went the wrong way you could leave yourself open to a charge and would be Picked up by the Military Police or the Provost. We were laden with equipment like the mule trains that plied the road whoever said it was donkey work in the Army was right because it bloody was. Beside the sixty pound pack we carried our rifles and ammunition pouches, rolled up greatcoat, entrenching tool, waterproof groundsheet as well as countless other bits and pieces of equipment. I eased my rifle from my shoulder and swapped arms this weapon was my pride and joy but now it seemed to weigh a ton and as I walked along I swore at it under my breath berating it for being so awkward and heavy.

We kept on going and I couldn't believe that we had further to go I had to keep repeating to myself not far now there can't be far to go now and I staggered along with my jaw clenched tight shut so that my teeth nearly shattered. My feet like everyone else's were blood raw and as I marched along I could feel the blister popping and filling my socks with their blood mucus and liquid. As we continued this journey to purgatory my shoulders felt like they would break and I felt like saying fuck it and sitting down on the side of the road for five minutes just to rest my weary bones. But then the old spirit would kick in and I would place one foot in front of the other and carry on marching down the road not wanting to let my friends down. As the night seemed to get darker we halted in a lane a short way from the front line and I thought bloody good show just let me sit down. As we looked further down the lane we could see a cottage that had been hit by shellfire and was now being used as an aid station and we could just make out the stretchers inside and laid outside. We watched as Senior Staff Officers drove the opposite way in their Staff Cars asleep and looking comfortable and rested and not at all bothered by the misery all round them. As I watched them I thought to myself what about us what about the 'Poor Bloody Infantry' but as far as that lot were concerned we could all go to hell. Again we came to an abrupt halt and I for one was not the only one that was glad because I don't think we could have made it much further. We were waved into a field by and MP who stood at the gate here the rest of the Battalion was quartered for as long as the Staff deemed it necessary. As we looked round we saw that our area was set out in a Picardy farmstead we walked around and found a dilapidated barn. Although a bit worst for wear we commandeered it as most of it was fairly weatherproof it was warm and comfortable with straw stored in it so we took it as our sleeping place. The straw was a bit rotten in places and it was lousy but that made no difference to us as we carried enough lice of our own so if they wanted to invite their relatives then they could. We settled down in the barn and we had just time to shrug our equipment off when every one of us fell down in a fatigue induced sleep. I don't think we would have woken up even if it had been Judgement Day and even the Germans if they had attacked would have been lucky to stir us. Everything we had been through since arriving the forced marches the fatigue and bone weariness had caught up to us and we slept the sleep of the dead.

Later that morning it was drizzling steadily as we went over towards the farmhouse were the field kitchens had been set up by the wall of another barn now that they had arrived by the Battalion cooks? We walked past Captains' Melstone and Thornley who had maps and lists in their hands which they were comparing and studying intently we saluted them but they never even noticed so they must have been studying something important. Frank said. "Smell that bacon frying is there anything in the world that smells better than that when your guts think they have been cut out of

you?” I replied. “Your right and having nothing to eat yesterday is enough for your brain to think your throats been cut.” As we walked over to where the cooks were dishing up breakfast our mouths ran with saliva like a lock gate in full spate and our stomachs rumbled like a cannibals drums at a feast. We stood there waiting and noticed that we were not the only ones to have smelled the bacon as the queue stretched nearly back to the barn we had occupied. People hobbled up on blistered feet and worn out legs tantalised by the smell of the cooking even though the march yesterday had taken everything out of them. The aroma that drifted over the farmstead had gotten the most die hard sleepers up and about and you could see small smiles breaking out over their weary lined faces at the thought of a hot meal. These were the ones that back in camp would miss breakfast for an extra half hour in bed but not here and as we handed our mess tins over to be filled we could hear the crump thump of shells on the wind again.

I couldn't remember when a meal had last tasted so good burnt crispy bacon and fresh bread washed down with hot sweet tea that as you drank you could see the globules of grease floating on its surface. We finished our breakfast off with a fag and then washed our mess-tins and utensils then we begged some hot water off the cooks in old kerosene tins so we could have a wash and shave in relative comfort. I felt sorry for the lads at the back of the queue as even early on the water had a film of scum on it that was as hard as a pie crust and was nearly black in colour. After we finished I know that we all felt better for having done our ablutions and we once again looked like soldiers instead of tramps. However we didn't get to rest for long as the same old fatigues and work parties were assigned added to these were camp guard and gas guard. But if you had to do any you would choose gas guard because all you had to do was stand beside an empty sixteen pounder shell casing that was suspended from a tree branch and then if you spotted a gas attack you just pounded hell out of it with a hammer warning everyone.

A small valley ran from the farmstead to a few cottages that made up a bit of a village further down the lane through this valley ran two streams that entered a tributary of the river Somme. These streams contained trout and other course fish and on the surface and in the reeds wild duck flourished. The village we heard had been abandoned in 1914 and the lane as it passed through was now overgrown some of the cottages had sustained damage but others were intact so these were used as Battalion offices and aid posts. As I looked over the land I thought what a crying shame because the fields of wheat, barley, potatoes and beetroots had gone to ruin and rotted because there was no one to look after them but then again there was a war on. As you looked towards the horizon you could see the German strongpoint's and trenches cut into the high ground across the valley. They had been dug deep into the chalk earth of Picardy and they contained massive bunkers that had been dug by Russian prisoners where the German troops could sit and wait out any bombardment unscathed but we did not know about theses at this time.

At the moment it so happened that there was a lull in the fighting so some of our lads fished in the streams while others washed their clothes as there had been a break in the weather and it was rather sunny now. Meanwhile some of our Officers borrowed shotguns and went duck hunting on the rivers they had some of our lads acting as beaters and retrievers gathering any ducks that had been shot. We sat back and watched this spectacle and Bert said. “Look at that bunch of fucking idiots running up and down like a Jack Russell with a flea up its ass. I say let the Officers collect their own bloody ducks because we won't get to share any the will be for the Officers diner table only. I couldn't help thinking what a good and fertile land this was and Frank told us that this was attested to by how many times it had been fought over. Henry V, Charles the Bold, Napoleon and the Germans all of them had fought to get control of this land and we were doing the same thing but we could not be allowed to sit out the war in this peaceful backwater and we received orders that we were moving up into the front line trenches. George made me fighting mad when he said. “Here we go back into the trenches again”, I would have punched his face in if Frank and Bert hadn't held me back. I shouted at him. “What the fuck would you know about serving in the trenches you were sat in Egypt looking after a fucking canal when we were fighting on Gallipoli?” George's lower lip stuck

out and he looked like a kid whose sweeties had been pinched however I was well into my stride now and said. "You want to keep quite George Drew until you have actually seen a man with his brains blown out all over the floor or his limbs blown off." I was seething all the pent up frustration of the last few months was poring out of me now and still I had not finished as I rounded on him again saying. "When you have held a dying friend in your arms and had his life blood gush all over you then you might have a right to complain about the trenches but until then just keep bloody quite." I shrugged Bert and Frank off and walked away to be by myself and calm down a bit leaving a shell shocked George in my wake with his mouth wide open.

Chapter Thirteen

That evening orders arrived for the Battalion and we were gathered together and told that we would be relieving a Welsh Battalion and taking over their section of trenches tomorrow while they went into reserve. We breakfasted in the morning and then started our steady march up to the front line as we got closer we could hear the crump thump of shells and trench-mortars and we also fancied that we could hear the rattle of machine gun fire. We filed into a communications trench and began to make our way down it as we walked along it was just about wide enough to accommodate a man with a pack on. As we filed along I looked up and saw that the trench wall was about seven feet high so all you could see was a patch of sky and the mans pack in front of you. It had been raining persistently again and there were no duckboards in these communication trenches and the chalky soil held the water which we now waded through. We now had to wait in the reserve trenches and we spent the rest of the day trying to get some shut eye or smoking and talking quietly. Then in the evening a guide led us forward but every few seconds we would halt and it was not until we got up to where the guide was that we saw why. There was an open road that ran through here and the reserve trenches finished only to restart on the opposite side so the guide was sending squads of men across this open section to the opposite side. We heard a machine gun start up and the guide said to us. "Hurry now get across the road the Hun has a machine gun fixed on it." We ran across and dived into the trench on the other side as the machine gun chattered into life and sent a few bursts our way we all made it safely though. We walked along other communications trenches and then we heard firing very close by and a flare arced up into the sky bursting and bathing everything in its bright white light. Then we heard Captain Melstone say. "Right you men fall out in this part of the trench and listened to what the men here have to say because it just might save your lives", this was it then we had reached the front line.

Frank and I ended up sharing a bay with a small bright eyed cockney bloke who had dark hair and a gravy dipper moustache. Frank asked him. "How are things on this part of the front line?" The man replied. "Non to bad it could be a lot worse but mark what I am saying to you watch out for their snipers dead keen in this sector they are." Frank and I looked at each other as he continued. "Apart from the morning and evening hate we tend to let each other alone live and let live as you might say. But every now and again some brainless Staff Walla comes up with a bright idea and all hell breaks loose of course their not bothered because they aren't here." I asked him. "What's a cockney doing with a Welsh Battalion I thought you would be with one of the London mobs?" He looked a little confused for a moment as he said. "Oh I see what you mean well it is like this the trouble and strife is Welsh that's the wife to you and we live in Wales so when this lot started I enlisted and got put in this mob." I looked at him and asked. "Isn't it strange being with strangers it would be for me I couldn't imagine not being with my pals?" He laughed as he replied. "These aren't strangers half of the lads are related to my missus and my four brothers in law are here twenty of us from the same village joined up together." He looked at us and then continued saying. "I would not be with another mob for all the tea in China and when they sing it makes your heart swell with pride." He looked down the trench and then bent double he got up from his position he said. "Come

on then I had better show you the observation post and what not but keep your noggins down because these German snipers never miss so be warned.

We reached the observation post and we could see that a slit had been left in the sandbags only it was covered over at the moment. The Welshman who was on duty was observing the ground to his front through a trench periscope which he would turn to scan the landscape. Jack Lewis the small cockney who was guiding us said. "Always look through the periscope never be tempted to look through the observation slit." He spoke to the sentry who had his eye glued to the periscope saying. "Isn't that right Owen we had one silly sod a few days ago who had a nosey through the slit and they shot him through the head." Owen looked down on us from the fire step and I could see that he must have been a miner because he carried the blue scars of his trade like tattoos on his skin he said. "Bloody silly yon man was they hit him dead centre of the forehead blood and brains all over the place poor sod never knew what hit him boyo." Jack Lewis continued. "That's right so if you want a quick trip to the potter's field just show your face at that slit." I noticed that further down a Vickers machine gun had been sited in its own nest of sandbags and armour plating. The Welshman called Owen looked down again and said to me. "Would you like to take a look out at No Man's Land through the periscope?" I stepped up and looked through the eyepieces on the scope I could make out the German wire and trenches in the distance and the shell holes and humps that covered the distance between us. Just the a very light was fired into the air and the vista in front of me was bathed in bright light and shadows I stepped down and let Frank have a look. Then Jack Lewis showed us the latrine this was dug into the trench wall and was just a hole dug in the floor with a plank placed across it. It smelled something awful and someone had tried to kill it by putting down chloride of lime unfortunately this hadn't worked and the smell permeated the area for some distance.

In the morning after the hate and before the Welsh mob we were relieving left they started to clean up the trenches and we gave them a hand. Picking up old cigarette packets and other litter as well as any debris that had fallen into the trench we also shored up any part that needed it. We were told by Jack Lewis that this happened most mornings the Armies way of keeping you busy and that the Officers usually inspected about nine o' clock. Jack and his brother in law Owen had got a brew going and were coking bacon on a old can lid they asked us if we would like to join them and we answered that we would be pleased to do so. The smell of the bacon cooking was heavenly and the cleaning and shoring work had given us an appetite and this would fill the hole. I said to Jack. "This trench seems to be well built I must say?" He looked at me with an appraising eye and replied. "A lot better than some in this sector the firing steps have been raised a bit and the parapets well earthed. We have shored it up better and used more sandbags out front we have erected more wire and have put more duckboards down on the trench floor", he passed us our teas and continued. "Every mob that takes over tries to improve on it as best they can but with everything else that is going on and the time you have to do things it is hard work." Owen handed us our bacon on the end of a bayonet saying. "Get that down you boyos it will set you up for a bit."

During the night we had talked on and off to Jack and Owen and I told them a bit about Gallipoli which seemed to impress them and after this they treated us as old sweats. They showed us our firing and stand to positions and a couple of dugouts we could take shelter in to sleep if the weather was bad. They were really good blokes the pair of them and they gave us hundreds more little pieces of advice that would make life easier in the trenches here. They told us to hack the bottom off our greatcoats to stop them getting caked in mud and making them hard to move in. Eventually though they picked up their kit and shook hands with us Jack said. "Remember what I told you about the Hun snipers keep your noggins down and don't volunteer for anything the bloody Staff will volunteer you enough as it is." Then Owen came up to us saying. "Take it easy boyos and keep the faith remember when the old Hun is quite leave him that way it's for the best." They waved goodbye and formed up with their Company they moved off down the trench and the last I saw of

them was Jack's sad watery eyes looking at us and him raising his hand in a final salute. During the day when the Welsh had gone there was lots to do around the trenches stacking ammunition and flares, rations and the there was sentry duty and observation duty as well as dozens of other things. That night Captain Thornley and I had been designated to pick up the rum ration for our section of trench we found our way to the supply point fairly easily and picked up the large stone bottle of rum and then made our way back. The journey back was pretty uneventful apart from a bit of fire that flew overhead from a German fixed machine gun there was nothing else and we arrived safely back at our lines with the precious rum. The lads were glad to get this ration as it was one of the main things that lifted their spirits in the trenches and most people looked forward to their rum ration with great anticipation.

The next night Captain Thornley had a patrol briefing on so it was left to me to show our new Lieutenant Mr Jennings who had just been posted in where to pick it up from as he would be taking over the duty from the Captain. We collected our ration from the supply point without any incidents and now we were ready to return back to our lines and I for one would be glad of it. The rum came in large two gallon stone jars that were heavy and awkward to carry but before I could pick them up a bombshell comes my way. Lieutenant Jennings said. "I will lead the way back from here Pte Lamb just follow me." I wasn't sure about this at all as this was the first time he had travelled the route and it was dark another thing was he wasn't any Captain Thornley. For a start he looked even younger than me and with his fair hair blue eyes and long eye lashes he looked a bit effeminate to say the least. But he was an Officer and had given me an order so who was I to argue but I thought bloody hell he is still wet behind the ears and I didn't like what was happening one bit. We had been moving for some time and I knew that something was wrong we hit wire and he had led us in the wrong direction because it was the German wire. We had crossed No Man's Land like taking a stroll in the park and then the inevitable happened our luck ran out and Mr Jennings ran into a tin can alarm system hung on the wire. The noise rattled out across the landscape and then the whole front opened up with flares arcing into the sky and firing coming from all directions at once or so it seemed to me. I ditched the rum ration in order to survive and found shelter from the whizzing bullets in a shell hole. As I crouched there I remembered the time I had been caught on the Turkish wire on Gallipoli and I shuddered at the memory and tried to dig myself further down into the hole. I swore under my breath calling the young Lieutenant every swear word I could think of and then some in fact as the fire coming towards me intensified the more I cursed him. He was typical of his class of Officer thought they knew everything and knew sod all just because they had a pip on their jackets wouldn't listen to anything the kind that got men killed with their stupidity. I lay there and thought the best thing to do was to wait and then when things quietened down make a dash back for our lines before the Germans sent a patrol out to investigate.

I saw Lieutenant Jennings off to one side with his hands on his head and his arse stuck up in the air like a bloody ostrich. I shouted at him and he managed to make his way to my hole and cover and this time he listened to what I had to say and we waited till the front settled down before making the dash back to our lines. We managed to get back safely I don't know exactly what was said to him but I believe he got a right bollocking but I will give him his due he never tried to lay the blame at my feet. However he was never sent for the rum ration again neither were me or him very popular that night when the lads found out that their rum ration had been lost. The thing was he only lasted another couple of days in the line once again he ignored advice this time about the snipers and that was the last time he did because they nailed him he had paid the ultimate price for his arrogance. Two days later it was our turn to leave the front and we handed over to a Scottish Territorial Battalion we gave them the same information and help that we had been given by the Welsh. We marched out tired but relieved that we had been through our first time in these positions without incurring serious injury or death well apart from the Lieutenant but his stupidity didn't count. We retired to the reserve trenches for a few days just in case the Hun's launched a surprise attack at the take over but nothing happened and we left to return to our farm settlement and village. Just because we were out of the line didn't mean that you got a rest oh no that would be too simple. There were

always fatigues and work parties that had to be done and you prayed for a rest but you didn't get one and you were mentally and physically tired and worn out.

Sometimes it was hell taking supplies to the front the first mile or so was alright because either the wagons or mule trains did all the hard work it was when you got close then everything had to be carried by hand food water equipment had to be shifted to the reserve trenches directly behind the front line trenches. You carried all sorts of stuff ammunition, from rifle to trench-mortar had to be moved through the communication trenches and it was really awkward. We had to carry the lot all the wood to be used props, timbers, duckboards, and then there were the sandbags and the Bain of my life the coils of barbed wire. It was terrible stuff to carry and got caught all over the place you carried it in coils that weighed about a hundred weight this was slung on a pole carried between two blokes. Apart from getting stuck everywhere it also ripped your hands to pieces and by the time you reached the supply points your lower legs and hands had been ripped to pieces and you looked like you had been dragged through a bramble patch. We moved up through the communication and reserve trenches a lot of which were in a poor state of repair with cave ins, flooded floors, parts blown in and some and some flooded to near enough the top. Mind you sometimes this was an advantage as the Germans seemed to concentrate on the nicer sections of trench leaving these others alone when they were shelling. It was hard moving along some of them as they were little more than wet ditches that you stumbled along with irregular floors and right angle turns every so far.

We staggered up a communications trench and George cursed saying. "What the hell these ammunition boxes are bloody murder to carry", as he took another chunk of skin from his leg. Bert replied to this as he said. "Shut up George you want to try carrying this barbed wire like me and Billy Boy then you would have something to flap your gums about." Frank joined in at this point saying. "Yes or try carrying the trench-mortar ammunition like me and Nobby that's not easy either", and we staggered along the trench cursing as we went. We passed through the next right angle bend and came to a halt as a party that had dropped their loads were coming back down the trench there was more swearing and cursing as we all met up. The only way to relieve the situation was that the men who had dropped their loads had to climb out of the trench onto the top while we made our way along and past this was the only way to keep the supplies flowing through the trenches. As we got closer all talking ceased as any noise at all would be greeted by the Germans opening up with everything they had. We arrived at the front supply points and dropped our stuff off for the boys that needed it and then we started on the long journey back as we moved along we met up with another lot coming up with supplies. George was being his usual stropy self saying. "Why should we get out on top of the trench just for these?" Frank replied. "So help me George if you don't get out of this fucking trench and let these lads by I will punch you on the bloody nose." Bert added his twopenneth to this saying. "Get up on top you idiot you know e always give way to anyone carrying supplies when we are returning and keep your fucking noise down as well before you get one of us killed. George wasn't happy with this but he shut up which I was glad of because I was sick of his constant whining and complaining which was getting on my nerves. Anyway we got out and laid on top while the other lot went past and then we dropped back down into the trench without incident and carried on until we got back to the road. Then we had a further two miles to walk back to our Battalion lines which took some time and when we arrived there we were absolutely shattered.

We returned to our barn but some other mob had been using it whilst we were at the front and had left their lice to breed with ours and as we settled down for what was left of the night they started to feed with a vengeance. Bert shouted "Bloody hell I'm being eaten alive in here the more I kill the more come to their bloody funerals for the wake." Nobby Clark said. "I wouldn't mind all they do is snack on me like a bloody picnic they don't have a proper meal." I replied. "Just leave them to it we cant kill all of them there must be a thousand of the buggers in here and more of their relatives arriving by the minute. It was really bad and everyone in the Battalion was in the same boat we cleaned the old straw out of the barns and replaced it with new stuff burning the old straw and killing our tormentors at the same time. Then we were packed off in sections to the delousing centre farther

back behind the lines where we had quite a pleasant time. First of all we were given a good bath in disinfected water our old uniforms underclothes and socks were taken away and burned. After the first bath we were transferred to a second bath that had been filled with a chemical that finally killed off the lice then we were handed clean uniforms and underclothes and socks. We went through this treatment quite a few times but it made no difference within a few days the lice were back and once again we were lousy. So you would sit with a candle running it along the seams of your trousers shirts or uniform jackets were the little buggers liked to lay their eggs or you would use your thumb for the same purpose. However nothing seemed to work for long and in the end it was just something that you had to put up with.

Christmas had arrived and the first lot of leave men were allowed to go home George as a Corporal had gone along with CSM Dobby and Captain Melstone. Bert Frank and I along with Captain Thornley and RSM Greaves had stayed behind and were due to go with the second lot. So we had given our letters and postcards along with small presents to our friends to pass on to our loved ones. So most of the first leave batch had set off in good heart singing as they went and cheering us I didn't really mind as I had received a letter from Helen saying that she was working over Christmas so she wouldn't have been back home anyway. She had returned to Manchester after Rosie had recovered to carry on with her nursing and must have been allocated duty over the Christmas period. A few days after the lads had gone we moved back into the front line though this time obviously in a smaller section of trench than we had been in last time. It was not as well maintained as our last section had been the drainage was bad and the dugouts were a bit on the small side and did not look that well constructed. The morning hate had been fierce earlier with trench-mortars and artillery firing both ways just to welcome us back to the front. We had repaired what damage we could to the trench but tonight we would have to go out on a wiring party to repair the damage done to our entanglements. At the moment though me and Bert were sat on the firing step having a chin wag and a fag when he suddenly said. "I had a letter from Mabel the other day and as far as I can tell things seem to be in a bit of a mess back home." I asked. "In what way Bert did Mabel say?" He replied. "It seems to be Rosie from what I can gather she is not well again something to do with the munitions factory or maybe it's something else Mabel thought you could have a word when you go home?" I looked at him and said. "She didn't mention anything in her letters things seemed to be alright." Bert flicked his fag end away saying. "Maybe she didn't want to worry you anyway Mabel seems to think you're the only one who can sort it out", and his voice trailed off. We both sat on the step not talking anymore and I thought Rosie old girl just what are you doing to yourself. Bert spoke again saying. "Anyway I just thought that you would want to know how things are." I told him that I was grateful to him for letting me know but I was very confused and concerned although I didn't tell him this.

Night fell and we got ready for the wiring party then after the briefing we got up onto the top of the parapet and led down from this position it wasn't hard to see where the apron wire had been damaged by the shell fire this morning and we could see that there was a fair bit to do. Each man in the wiring party had a job to do and we had rehearsed these till we knew our roles backwards. Bert and Frank were carrying pickets and I was carrying angle irons and Pat Stiles and Nobby Clark had the wire in charge was S/Sgt Cocker stroking his moustache with his finger. Bert and Frank set up a row of pickets and I put my angle irons on them then Pat and Nobby strung a fence of four strands right along the length. Then they zig zagged the wire twelve feet in front and twelve feet behind to ground level using more angle irons the hammers we used and the tops of the pickets were muffled with rags to stop any noise. It was frightening being out in front of the trench and we were shitting our pants so scared were we every so often we would stop and listen for German activity. S/Sgt Cocker had his rifle with him and kept a lookout for German patrols and snipers but a massive artillery duel that happened before we arrived yesterday must have cleared them out for the time being. Pat and Nobby were still running strands of wire along the angled wire at the front and back this wire was sited at an angle narrowing down. It was taking time and we were all praying that we would be kept from harm when we finally saw that they were finished I think you could hear the sigh

of relief from our mouths back in England. The spare wire we had left we placed in between the two sets of wire and we made sure that the gap we had to leave could not be seen from the German positions. With this done and much to everyone's relief we made to get back to the trench and drop in. All of a sudden a noise stopped us in our tracks it had not come from our side but from the enemies. S/Sgt Cocker backed up to us and facing forward whispered. "Sounds like a German patrol and it could be out to snatch one of us as a prisoner." We strained our eyes as we looked out into the dark and shadows of No Man's Land for this is the direction in which they would come. The cold sweat of fear ran down our backs and faces and our stomachs tensed in anticipation of the first bullet that would penetrate and rip its way inside. S/ Sgt Cocker again whispered. "Okay you blokes carrying bombs when I give the order chuck them as far foreword as you can I will give them a few shots and we will drop back in the trench like magicians rabbits", and he smoothed his moustache with his finger.

Frank and I had been issued with a couple of Mills bombs apiece so we got them ready to throw when ordered while the rest of the lads crawled back to the trench and dropped into it. We waited tense and nervous cocking our ears listening for any little sound and then we could hear then out in front of us. I watched S/Sgt Cocker who was like a statue and just as cold and unfeeling until he shouted. "Give I to them lads", and we heaved our bombs forward while he rattled off a few shots. Then we crawled like hell back to the trench and all hell broke loose behind us as a machine gun started up I threw myself forward and was hanging over the parapet as hands grabbed me and pulled me into the trench. I landed in a heap on the bottom of the trench and then someone landed on top of me knocking the wind out of my lungs. Frank said. "Sorry Billy Boy but safety first eh?" I was so winded that I couldn't even swear at him so I made do with a glare. Both sides were now going at it hammer and tongue and this continued for some time with very lights soaring in to the sky machine guns rattling away and trench-mortars throwing their shells over. Eventually though things quietened down as they always did after a while soon we would be able to relax and get some rest or at least I hoped we would. Captain Thornley came over with RSM Greaves and S/Sgt Cocker saluted and made his report saying. "We spotted one of their patrols Sir probably trying to capture a prisoner from our wiring party anyway we couldn't be having that could we Sir so we did them before they did us." Captain Thornley replied. "Quite right as well S/Sgt Cocker I just hoe that you managed to get the wire fixed before you were interrupted?" S/Sgt Cocker smiled and stroked his moustache with his finger saying. "Certainly Sir we did a good job and it's as good as new the Hun won't get past that section of wire should they come calling." Captain Thornley said to us. "Well done all of you now get yourself off and get some rest", we saluted and he walked off. RSM Greaves stayed a moment more so he could say to us. "Make sure you return that equipment before you do anything else", and then he to walked off no doubt to make someone else's life a misery.

Later as we sat on the fire step we could hear shouting from No Man's Land Frank asked what's going on out there then I thought everything had gone quite?" Eli Stone who was on sentry duty and looking through the trench periscope replied. "It's a couple of them Huns that you had the barney with tonight." I was a bit confused and asked. "If its part of the Hun patrol how come we haven't heard them before now?" Eli said. "Because they were probably still unconscious before from your bombs but the have certainly woken up now." We all listened and we could hear one of the men saying. Hilfe, Hilfe , Ernst wir Sind du." Then from over on the right we heard the second one shouting. Muti, muti, hilfe bitte, muti hilfe Ernst", it was heart rending to listen to and it just went on. Bert asked. "What's yon bloke rabbiting on about?" A voice from behind us said. "One of them the one on the left is asking for help from his friend and his chum on the right is asking for his mother to help him." We turned and saw RSM Greaves who was listening to what was happening and had answered Bert's question he stood there for quite a while as all the old regulars did like a statue and then he walked on down the trench without another word. The crying and screaming went on all night and was fraying our nerves a couple of our blokes went out to try to fetch them in but every time a Hun machine gun would open up so they had to come back empty handed. In the end it

was that bad one of the trench mortars lobbed a couple of shells in their direction after this there was blessed silence although the Germans retaliated for quite a while after.

Life in the trenches went on as always but it was a dirty foul smelling lousy place to be, death and destruction were all around and the 'Grim Reaper' was ready to shake your hand at any time. One minute you were scrambling around for dear life without time to know whether you were on your arse or your elbow the next minute it was boring beyond belief. The one thing that seemed to make life bearable was that we all wanted to be at the front coming to grips with the Hun. The main thing however was your mates because nobody wanted to let their pals down so even though you may have been frightened to death or tired beyond belief you carried on because of them. The longer you had been in the front line the more you could recognise the munitions that were flying about and could even judge near enough where it would explode. This allowed us to awe some of the new replacements when they ducked down and we would stand there nonchalant knowing very well the shells would land in the reserve trenches or far behind the lines. Nobody who had been in the trenches could ever or would ever forget the smell of them this was made up of stale sweat, damp uniforms, shit, bacon, chloride of lime, decomposition and cigarette smoke with the smell of cordite drifting around just to add a new ambience.

Again our time in the line was finished and we headed back home to our lines at the farmstead were more fatigues and working parties waited for us just as an extra treat. Even over Christmas there was no let up the truce of 1914 was long gone what the Staff on both sides wanted now was more aggression. The equipment and troops kept piling into the area I received a letter from Helen saying that she would be off for a few days at the same time I would and that I should go to Manchester to see her and work out which days we had off that were the same. Her letters really kept me going and lifted me when I was down but recently there was something else in them that I couldn't put my finger on. Don't get me wrong they were still as loving as ever full of endearments and promises but to me something dark had seemed to creep into them. Though it may just have been my imagination because we were so tired and bone weary now that we were on our chinstraps. We got used to falling asleep anywhere and at anytime when you were not in the trenches although even there we could fall asleep standing up leaning against the trench wall if it came down to it I could sleep on a clothes line. The day came when the first leave party came back and the lads were telling us what good times they had at home but they were a bit more quite now as it sunk in that they were back at the front. They asked us what had been going on while they had been away and so we told them quite nonchalant that we had been back into the line. Hearing this they clamoured for information so we told them about the wiring party and how we had attacked the Hun patrol with bombs and bullets. Then we told them about the two injured Germans in No Man's Land and how they had screamed and cried all night long until the trench-mortar had silenced them this left them a bit more sober still.

We could tell they were impressed and quite agog with what we had told them they said how lucky we had been to be back in the line gaining experience but we didn't see it that way. We asked George what had been happening at home and he swore saying. "Everyone keeps asking about the 'Big Push' you get sick of the questions when's the 'Big Push' going to take place and then where's it going to take place it really is sickening not to mention annoying." Things started to break up now so that the second leave detachment could pack their kit ready to catch the transport that would take them to the train for home. It was as I was packing that George pulled me to one side and said. "Listen Billy Boy Rosie is really ill now she is in bed and cannot leave it Doctor Durkin has seen her and its something to do with her lungs consumption or something. Anyway Helen is there looking after her now." My heart skipped a beat at this news my Helen was with Rosie I managed to stutter. "When did Helen get there she was supposed to be on duty and I was going to see her at Manchester is she alright George?" He replied with a smile. "She's fine and got home a couple of days ago she asked for and received special permission to look after Rosie telling the hospital it was her sister that was ill she wrote but you probably haven't received the letter yet."

I thought hard about what we had talked about and even though I was racked with worry about Rosie I now knew that Helen would be there when I got home and this though cheered me up immensely. I said to George. "I had better finish my packing off because we will be off tomorrow after a visit to the delousing centre", we would go there for we could not be allowed to return home lousy that would never do. The public back home must never know what conditions its soldiers had to put up with because as far as they were concerned this was a clean and noble war little did they know. Frank came across and said. "Are you packed and ready for the off Billy Boy?" I replied. "Yes I'm all done it doesn't take long does it when you're a soldier because you don't own that much." He looked at me and then laughed saying. "No you certainly don't but I think we have time for a last fag and then we will get our heads down so we will be fresh tomorrow. In the morning we arose and had breakfast with our fellow mates who formed the second batch of men going on leave we mounted the transport and first it dropped us at the delousing centre then when we were finished it took us on the first stage of our leave journey.

The leave train seemed to take forever to get anywhere and it seemed that every couple of miles we were held back to let some priority rolling stock rattle past on its way to god knows where. From every wagon on the train came the groans and comments of hundreds of soldiers there were shouts of, "shoot the driver" and "we could march it bloody faster" some wag shouted, "that's General Haig's dinner that just went past." We wiled away the time by playing cards and smoking or we would just talk about what we were going to do when we got home. Nobby Clark said. "The first thing I want is proper ale instead of this 'Vin Rouge' shit we've been drinking. Then I am going to fill up on some of my Ma's home cooking I tell you lads it will be heaven." You could almost see the saliva running down his chin at the thought of decent grub and a lot more of the lads thought about the same thing as well as their loved ones and so the wagon went quite. Eventually we arrived at Boulogne on a wet and windy night we marched down the quayside and embarked on a ship that looked pretty small to my eyes. But it didn't matter this was our leave ship and we stood against the rail and gave a cheer as it slipped its moorings and we nudged out of the harbour and out to sea heading for Blighty.

Chapter Fourteen

Our first sight of England was the dim lights on the wet harbour wall at Folkestone in the early dawn light as we docked and tied up there was another ship berthed a hospital one and I could see that another ship could have tied up on the harbour wall. Then the waiting was over and the gangplank was lowered and we started to disembark there were trains waiting down here as the tracks extended all the way to the end of the harbour wall. These however were for the wounded that even now were being unloaded from their ship and loaded on from the harbour station. We however would have to march up the hill on what was known as the Road of Remembrance and catch our train from Folkestone Central Station. We did this and now we were waiting to board the train that would take us further on our journey finally we got on although we were a bit squashed we did not care the train blew its whistle and then pulled away. At last we were on our way on the long journey up north we had to change trains and this we did quite happily as the train we caught although full was nothing compared to the first one we had been on. We chatted and played cards to pass the time smoked a lot and tried to sleep but most of us were counting every turn of the wheels as they carried us home to our families and loved ones. On our train there were troops from nearly all the services there were sailors in their bellbottom trousers and Naval Officers full of gold braid then there were RFC pilots with fancy wings on their uniform chests and brightly coloured medal ribbons below them. Also the Infantry, Artillery, Engineers, Pioneers and many more service personnel as well as troops from all over the Empire sat in the carriages or corridors as the train thundered on. Finally we

arrived on a dark Blackthorn station in the early hours of the morning we looked round for some shelter as a hard drizzle had now started. There was no way we could go home at this time of morning waking our loved ones they would think it was bad news and probably be scared to death. The Station Master came along and told us that they had opened up the 'Picture Palace' up as a temporary troops sleeping centre and that we should try there. So we cut on over there and were told we could sleep in the gallery for what was left of the night for most people sitting on those hard seats it would have been almost impossible to sleep. However to us who were used to the trenches it was no hardship for we had a knack of dropping off anywhere and sleeping sitting up suited us fine. We awoke early the next morning and made our way back outside into the still dark morning air and then we walked down the road kitbags and rifles slung.

Frank was the first to take his leave saying to Bert, Nobby and me. "I will see you lads up and down no doubt on this leave but right now I want to see my old dear and make sure she is alright." So we said our farewells and then shook hands Frank turned and walked off to catch his tram and we went off to catch ours. We caught our tram and Nobby was the next to say goodbye as he only lived a couple of stops up the route again we shook hands and said goodbye to him and he got off. That left me and Bert as the tram rattled and clattered its way over the tracks and crossways but it was not long before my stop was coming up but Bert stayed put. I said. "Are you not getting off here with me so as you can see Mabel she will be dying to see you?" He replied. "No that's alright I told her in my last letter that I didn't really know when we would get home so she has been staying at my house with my dad so she will be there now." I shook hands with him and wished him and Mabel a good leave he wished the same for me and Helen and then said. "Billy Boy give Rosie my love and tell her that me and Mabel will be over to see how she is", I nodded my acknowledgment and then turned and got off the tram. I walked down General Gordon Street and though how much had changed yet again in the short time since I had left after convalescing as I walked along a fear gripped my heart and I hoped everything was alright with Rosie. I stopped before the gate of 123 and held my breath for a moment saying a little prayer then I opened the gate and walked up the path. It had started to rain and now it was coming on heavier I approached the front door then I knocked and waited for someone to answer it I seemed to have been waiting for ever and was just about to knock again when the light in the hall came on and someone was opening the door.

As the door opened I could see haloed by the light from behind her black hair cascading down onto her shoulders the form of my Helen standing there. My heart missed a beat and I held my breath time seemed to stand still and then with my pulse racing and my heart trying to beat its way out of my chest I tried to say something. Before my words could even form let alone get out Helen was throwing herself into my arms the tears streaming down her face and strange little mewling sounds coming from her throat. I had dropped my rifle and kitbag and I now held her as tight as a Scotsman would a guinea and I am not afraid to admit that tears streamed down my face also joining and uniting with Helen's. It seemed like years since I had last seen my love and so much had happened I wanted us to hold each other for ever loving and being loved with no war to come between us. We were both so young and yet we had been through so much surely love and youth deserved a chance at happiness. But I am afraid that at this point in history we didn't stand much of a chance however because of the war barriers were coming down and attitudes too many things were changing for the better. Helen clung to me and whispered in my ear. "Billy Boy is it really you I have missed you more than words can say I thought my heart would burst when I saw you standing there." I held her with desperation and whispered back. "Helen I cant believe that I am holding you there have been times when I never thought I would see you again but this makes up for all of them." We kissed and then I picked up my rifle and kitbag and we walked into the house our arms round each other not wanting to break our physical contact. We released each other and went into the front parlour where I dropped my kit then we moved into each others arms again and Helen began to cry. I said. "Hey what's this then I'm here and I have my leave and where together that's all that matters my love." She took her head from my shoulder and replied. "I'm just so glad to see you I have missed you so much and sometimes in Manchester it has been so lonely being away from here

although I have made friends there. But it is your letters when I received them that kept me going.” I confided that hers had done the same for me and that without them I might not have made it this far and would have probably wallowed in a sea of despair.

We stood back holding hands at arms length and Helen said. “Poor Billy Boy all the things you have been through in this war and you so young why is it always the young that have to suffer?” I pulled her into my arms and replied. “It only seems that way love there are people of all ages suffering in this bloody war I just wish we could get it over and then we could all come home for good.” I kissed her but was a bit startled by the passion with which Helen kissed me back this was not our usual kind of embrace there was something else here what seemed to be a need and also there was a kind of promise in the kiss that I had never felt before. Helen stood back and I looked at her through new eyes now she blushed a bit but said. “I know what you are thinking but it shows how much I have missed you if you didn’t like it say so.” I managed to stutter out. “No I liked it fine it was just well a little different from our usual kisses.” She looked at me and smiled quite brazenly saying. “Put it down to living away from home if you like though its not.” She looked deep into my eyes as she continued. “We have all had our own sorrows in this war Billy Boy and the whole worlds changed and I will tell you something it will never go back to what it was. There are new attitudes about society that have changed and there is more freedom in what we choose to do and when we do it women have changed as well. Now that they are doing jobs that men used to do instead of just running the house they have become more liberated in their ways deeds and thoughts”, the passion with which she said this left me a bit stunned.

I looked again at Helen and now I saw the set to her jaw which had never been there before and now a new determination shone through. Also I could tell that the old shy Helen was gone she was no longer a girl but instead a woman in her own right with a woman’s wants and dreams. We kissed again more softly this time and all our love for each other was contained in this one embrace. Older people might say that we didn’t know what love is but I would say to them that our love was as strong and as passionate as any that they had known. We broke off the kiss and held each other at arms length again then Helen said. “Sit down Billy Boy because we need to talk I really need to tell you about Rosie and her illness”, and I could see the sadness and tears that sprung to her eyes when she related this. Sitting down in opposite chairs I took out my cigarette case and offered her a smoke she smiled tenderly when she saw the case we both took a cigarette and I lit hers first before lighting mine she blew smoke out saying. “I see you still have my Christmas present from last year I thought that you may have lost it after everything you have been through I’m glad you haven’t.” I replied. “I have carried it everywhere with me it is my good luck charm it was the first present you ever gave me when we knew that we loved each other and I will never part with it.” Tears formed in her eyes and she pulled from her blouse the locket I had given her with our photos in it as she said. “I still have your present and I never take it off it rests on my breasts a reminder and symbol of our love.” Helen shook herself and said. “We have so much to talk about love but right now we must speak about Rosie and stop getting sidetracked we will talk about us later.” She threw her fag end into the fire grate then continued. “Come on lets go through to the kitchen where it’s warm and cosy and I will make a pot of tea and I will tell you what’s going on.” So we adjourned to the kitchen and Helen brewed the tea she made it just how I liked it strong enough to stand the spoon up in and sweet.

We sat at the kitchen table and Helen began by saying. “There is really no easy way of saying this Billy Boy if there was I would spare you the pain I would rather rip my tongue out than hurt you”, she looked across at me and tears coursed down her face. I could not bear to see her like this so I said. “Hold on love please don’t upset yourself both of us together should be able to work something out for our Rosie.” Helen held her hand up in that unmistakeable gesture of hers saying. “Listen to me my love I am sorry to be the one to tell you but Rosie is dying and she has not long left

I have taken indefinite leave to look after her.” I sat at the table stunned by what I had just heard of course I knew that Rosie was ill and even seriously so but I always thought that she would get better and now I learned she was going to die. The tears coursed down my face now just like Helens had and I just wanted to scream or even better kill someone at this moment I could really do serious damage to someone or something. Instead I sat at the table scared for her and for myself and trying to gather every bit of inner strength I possessed to help me cope with what was happening. I had seen a lot of death since the war began and I had lost a lot of friends but this was different Rosie along with Ma, Helen, Mabel, Beth, CSM Dombly and George were the only family I had. Losing Rosie in this way would be like losing my Mother and Father again unthinkable, unbearable and heart wrenching.

Helen came round the table and sat down next to me she took me in her arms like a child and my head led on her bust as my tears wet and stained her dressing gown soaking through to her nightdress below. She crooned at me and whispered in my ear as though I was her child but then again we were both children really when you weighed it up. For all our grown up bodies and how mature we were I knew that we were still only young and at times I thought too young for what was happening our adolescent years had been taken from us. When I eventually got control of myself and my emotions Helen kissed me on the forehead and I said. “You had better tell me everything I need to know what is happening to her?” Helen replied. “The thing is Billy Boy that her lungs are failing and in a while she wont be able to breath it’s a bit like consumption her lungs are filling with fluid and she is literally drowning.” She took my hands in hers and continued. “Of course it is caused by the Liddite and Cordite that she has been working with down at the munitions factory. It destroys their lungs as well as their livers and that is why they turn that yellow colour of course we are giving her something for the pain but it is only a matter of time there is no cure darling.” She squeezed my hand saying. “She has been asking for you over and over again when is Billy Boy coming home? She really loves you with all her heart.” I looked at Helen and blushed and she smiled at me shaking her head as she said. “It’s alright love Rosie has told me all about her feelings for you she told me that she told you of her love and your answer.” I replied. “Honest Helen I would have told you but it was nothing nor could there ever be from my side I love Rosie like the sister I never had you are the only person I will love in this life or the next.” She sighed and answered. “I know that love but you must understand that when Rosie told you that she loved you she already guessed that she was seriously ill.” My mouth dropped open and I said. “Well why didn’t she say something then I asked her if she was ill or if everything was alright I even said she looked a bit peaky.” I lit another smoke wanting to break something anything but I continued. “Why didn’t she just tell me? I even told her to leave the bloody munitions factory in fact I begged her to the silly cow.” Helen looked at me with such compassion in her eyes that I nearly broke down again as she said. “Don’t be angry with her she stopped at the munitions factory because she thought the shells she was making would be used to safeguard you and keep you safe over there that’s how deep her love is for you.”

I don’t know about angry I was fucking livid why hadn’t she got out of that hell hole never mind about me why hadn’t she just stopped when I told her?” My head was whirring and my heart breaking but I could not stay angry at my golden haired little imp for long as I thought of the cheek she used to give me not long ago and the cheeky grin that came to her lips when she spoke to me the tears rolled down my face again. Helen squeezed my hands again stood up and kissed me on the top of my head and said. “We had better go up and see her she will know that you are home by now and she will be like a flea on a bed warmer and she needs to rest.” We went up stairs into a bedroom on the first floor that had been made up and was now Rosie’s sick room. As we entered I saw that it was nice cheerful room with a good fire going in the grate keeping it warm and snug and in the big double bed propped up on pillows was my Rosie. I think I must have gasped so much was I taken aback by her appearance Helen had warned me that she was very ill and dying but the person lying propped up by the pillows looked like a skeleton. Her skin was like parchment and the yellow sheen made it look worse the hair that had been a lustrous blonde was now thin dull and lifeless she held her arms out to me and they were like twigs and her face looked like a skull. The one thing that was still the same however were her sharp mischievous blue eyes they stared at me now as I walked over

to the bed I hugged her but she felt like a small frail bird. She said in a voice that already sounded like it came from the grave. "Hello Billy Boy I'm so glad to see you I have been praying for you to come and here you are at last", she released me and I stepped back. She started coughing and Helen ran to her side and held a bowl so she could spit into it the phlegm sounded like it was coming from her boots and a creaking whistling and wheezing came from her lungs. Helen used a cloth to wipe her mouth when she had finished and I saw there was blood on it Rosie slumped back onto the pillows and there was sweat on her brow and she was heaving for breath. Slowly she got her breath back but it was rasping and short I said. "Are you alright now Rosie girl you gave me quite a scare then for a few moments?" Helen looked at me and Rosie replied. "Don't you worry about me give me a few days and I will be up and about getting your breakfast and giving you what for."

We both knew that this was a lie but I kept up the charade saying. "That's my girl there is no doubt that in a couple of days you will be as good as new and I will be giving you as good as I get." I felt the tears prickling in my eyes at this banter but I held them back for a brave lass who I loved dearly. Rosie took hold of Helen's hand and kissed it she said. "This is my angel of mercy she is a pure gem Billy Boy and as dear to me as a sister I couldn't have asked for better care or a better nurse she has made this time bearable for me." Helen gave her a sip of water to moisten her lips Rosie finished with it thanking Helen and saying. "It really is good to see you love I feel content now that everything is right because the two people I love most in the world are with me." Helen came round the bed and stood beside me she whispered in my ear. "Go and sit beside the bed and keep her company while I go and get her pain medicine and sort things out for the day." Rosie looked at us and her eyes bored into us as she said. "Listen to me I love you both dearly and I can see the love you have for each other. What I'm saying is with a love like yours there are no restrictions nothing is wrong or taboo or socially unacceptable from where I sit life is so short to bother what people think especially now", and she started coughing again. Helen moved to go to her but Rosie stopped her saying. "Please for me spend every minute you can together and don't let what people say or think stop you showing your love for each other you are the only people that matter", and she settled back against the pillows again. I went and sat in the chair beside the bed and held Rosie's skeletal hand while Helen left the room with a slight flush to her cheeks to get the pain medicine for Rosie. I looked at my friend and sudo sister led in the bed and she looked at me and said. "Well Billy Boy the war profiteers have done for me at last they have used our patriotism and love for our fighting men to kill us while they line their pockets, may they rot in hell." I tried to shush her so she could save her energy but she continued. "You know I'm dying I know I am but I am not alone there are thousands dying and not just on the battlefields but in the factories for profit." She settled back down and it was my turn to speak now so I told her everything that had happened since I had been away and how glad I was to be home again and to see her and that Bert and Mabel were coming round to see her. She smiled at me saying. "I know someone else who you are gladder to see than me and all of us." I could not deny this so I didn't try Rosie was so close to both of us that she knew what we felt for each other now more than ever.

She squeezed my hand and it felt no more than a tiny pressure on it she raised herself up onto her elbow and looked deep into my eyes saying. "Listen to me Billy Boy you must make Helen truly yours and she must make you truly hers you know what I'm talking about there is no time for waiting take it from one who is dying you must bed her." I was truly alarmed not by what she had said for the thought had entered my head but by the pain she had suffered and the colour of her face the sheer effort it had taken to raise her self up like this. Her face was the colour of old putty and beads of sweat stood out on her forehead as she slumped back against the pillows again drained and spent. I continued to hold her hand but she was quite now the last half hour having taken its toll on her. Even though her eyes were closed I could see the pain that was etched into every crease on her face. I looked round the room properly for the first time as I took it in the smell of sickness and death invaded my nostrils. Some people may disagree but take it from me there the two aromas are totally different if a patient is just sick you can smell the cloying atmosphere. It might sound silly but death has its own smell and it is nothing to do with decomposition death has a bouquet all of its own. It

is a smell that once you have noticed it you will never forget it and it stays with you for ever. It was then that it finally hit me square between the eyes Rosie was not going to recover up until this moment I had held the faint hope that there was a chance for her but now I knew there wasn't and it crushed me. Helen came back into the room with a covered tray she told me she would administer Rosie's pain medication now and that it should see her through until tonight and that she would see me later. I went over and kissed Rosie on her now dry forehead that was hot and had the roughness of sandpaper about it I said. "I will see you later love I'm going to have a sleep for a bit."

I walked over to Helen and kissed her she said to me. "Beth's made you some breakfast its downstairs in the kitchen go and have a bite to eat and see Beth then get your head down." I saluted her and made my way down to the kitchen there was a plate with eggs and bacon on it some buttered bread and a mug of tea I looked round for Beth but couldn't find her then I remembered she was taking over from Helen and so I must have missed her. I ate my breakfast and then had a fag I finished this and made my way up to bed Helen had told me that one of the other large rooms had been made up for me so I went to it and opened the door walking in. It was about the size of mine and George's old room but with only one large double bed in it I got undressed and climbed into the big bed it was comfortable and cosy and I snuggled down into it and closed my eyes. Just then there was a knock at the door and Helen walked in she shut the door and then locked it which puzzled me. She was wearing her dressing gown and I thought that she must have been getting ready for bed also then she removed it and I saw she had on her nightdress underneath. My mouth was now wide open and I looked like a demented codfish I watched not believing my eyes as she came across and climbed into the bed beside me. I tried to speak but it came out in a croak as I said. "What are you doing Helen you can't be here with me like this?" She looked at me with tears in her eyes and said. "Please Billy Boy don't ruin this we have so little time like Rosie said there is so much death and destruction in this war isn't it time you and me became true lovers?" I held her close and the smell of her was like a sun kissed orchard and I buried my face into her soft raven hair that smelled of flowers. I could feel every curve of her body through the thin nightdress and I must admit that it was definitely arousing me. I turned away from her my mind in turmoil but my body responding it felt so strange and shyness overtook me. Then Helen said. "Turn back to me love for pity sake don't you think I know what a mans body is like even naked don't forget I'm a nurse and have seen more than my fair share." I apologised saying. "Yes I know love I'm sorry please forgive me I was just at a loss", and I turned back to her all my embarrassment gone.

We led there our noses nearly touching and Helen said. "I want us to do this I live with death everyday just like you and I want a chance at some life with the boy I love can you understand that?" I kissed her softly and every bit of love I felt for her was in it I did not touch her nor did she touch me. We held each other and just talked and then we fell asleep when we woke we made love for the first time it was a bit awkward at first but we laughed our way through the more embarrassing bits. Then we talk in the small talk all lovers use to one another when there is no one else in the world that matters but you two. Later on Helen said something that nearly floored me as she asked. "I bet you didn't know that Mabel thought she was pregnant but it turned out to be a false alarm." My eyes stood out on stalks and I nearly choked as I replied. "Pregnant I didn't even know that they were that intimate there a pair of dark horses and no mistake I mean I knew they were in love but", and my sentence trailed off. Helen kissed my chest and said. "Oh yes the first time was last Christmas and they have done it whenever they could since then it was what they had done that really made up my mind for me. I felt like the whole world had gone mad Bert had never said a word to me not so much as a by your leave mind you I wouldn't have told him about me and Helen. She continued. "I take it by your response that Bert had said nothing to you about this am I right?" I replied. "I had no idea he never said so much as a word about it so I will have to watch him in future for there's no telling what he might get up to next." We talked on content just to hold each other and to get to know each other better in our new found intimacy we laughed a lot as lovers do at the start. It was warm and snug in the room and even more so in the big bed like I said I had the tendency to drop off in a split second

and so I never heard Helen say to me. "I must go and check on Rosie now just to make sure she and Beth are all right and don't need anything." Neither did I hear her leave the room and so it was late afternoon by the time I finally awakened I stretched out to touch Helen but she wasn't there so I wondered where she was and then I smiled thinking of having made love and I felt on top of the world.

I got washed and shaved and dressed in some old civvies just to potter round the house in then I went along to Helens room thinking she might have gone back there for appearances sake I knocked but there was no reply. So then I decided to see how Rosie was and if Helen was with her I knocked opened the door and went in she was propped up on her pillows but her eyes were closed and she was sleeping so I left quietly closing the door behind me. I went down stairs and into the kitchen Beth was stood at the range just taking the kettle off to make a pot of tea she beamed when she saw me. She put the kettle down after pouring water into the pot came across and kissed me saying. "I'm right pleased to see you Billy Boy how are you, have you had a good sleep?" I told her I had slept like a log and that I was just fine and then I asked. "How is Rosie doing I popped in but she was asleep", then I asked her if she had seen Helen. She replied. "Rosie's not too bad at the moment the pain medicine sees to that so its better she gets her rest when she can as she gets so tired what with the pain and her illness. Helen will be back later on she has gone to visit her parents but she will definitely return and she told me not to disturb you as you needed your rest as well." I blushed a bit on hearing this and then having steeped the tea Beth put it on the table and said. "Now sit you down and I will fix you a bite to eat you must be starving after all we can't have our hero fading away now can we?" She produced some cold beef cheese bread and butter and some onions which she had sliced and it was a regular feast. I tucked in with gusto and finished it faster than a plague of locusts in a cornfield then I lit a fag and sat talking to Beth for a while. Soon though she had to go back up to sit with Rosie in case she wakened and I was left to my own devices I wondered what to do. I didn't fancy going to the pub and to tell the truth I was missing Helen anyway I had a few more smokes and then I went upstairs and back to bed which still smelled of Helen I closed my eyes and the next thing I knew it was teatime. There was no one in the kitchen so I made my own tea there were a couple of pork chops in the larder and I had these with a couple of eggs and may I say it was very tasty. I thought Beth would be upstairs with Rosie so I decided to go and see them of Helen there was no sign yet but I hoped she would be back soon. I went upstairs and entered Rosie's room I saw Beth was asleep on a chair Rosie put her finger to her lips and beckoned me over to her.

I sat on the bed and we whispered to each other Rosie asked me. "Did you get a good sleep or were you too busy for that I hope you're not tired out?" A smile played over her lips and I looked askance at her as I realised that she knew all about what me and Helen had been up to. She laughed now and said. "Don't look so flabbergasted I took at guess at what has happened and I was right and I must say that it's not before time with you two." I changed the subject and we chatted about different things for quite a while but I could see that she was getting tired and so I said. "Goodnight Rosie old girl I will come and see you again tomorrow", and I kissed her on the forehead and left just as Beth was waking up. I went to my room and stripped off and got into bed I nestled in and though over the day's events I realised that I had left the light on and was just going to get out of bed and switch it off when the door opened. It was Helen and I watched as she turned the key in the lock switched off the light and I could hear her move over to the bed and then rustling as her clothes fell to the floor and then she had climbed in beside me and I held her naked in my arms. We revelled in each others bodies and we loved with a passion born of despair we understood each other and just let our feelings dictate our course. In the days that followed we spent as much time together as we could revelling in our love but there were other things to do and I hadn't long on leave we had tea with Helens parents and a good night with them. However we were at the stage in our love when you wanted to spend every minute in the company of your loved one to the detriment of everyone else. However we knew that this period couldn't last and two days later Bert and Mabel turned up to see Rosie and we all went up to her bedroom Rosie was as pleased as punch to see the two of them. We stopped and chatted to her for a while but she started to get tired and so we took our leave of her and

went back downstairs. The girls went off to get tea and sandwiches for us and I went into the front parlour with Bert I had lit the fire and it was quite warm and cosy.

I looked at Bert now with new eyes knowing what he and Mabel had been up to and I still wondered that I had not suspected a thing. I opened my cigarette case and offered one to Bert he took one and we lit up as he said. "I'm sorry about Rosie Billy Boy and if there is anything I can do you just need to ask Mabel as told me most of the details of her illness." I replied. "Thanks Bert but I don't think there is much we can do other than keeping her spirits up and showing her how much she means to us and how much we love her." The tears had started pricking my eyes when he said. "Helen has quite a bloom to her cheeks I don't think I have ever seen her look more radiant there's something on this leave agreeing with her." I shot him an inquiring look as I thought surely he can't know that Helen and I are intimate but his next words hit me like a punch to the stomach. "You look different as well mate something has changed about you and I can't put my finger on it maybe its seeing Helen again I don't know but something has definitely put the shine on both your faces. I knew that I had to get him off this subject in case he put two and two together so I said. "I'm thinking of going to visit Elijah I hers that he is home do you fancy like coming?" He replied. "That sounds like a good idea we can see how he's managing and give him the news about the Battalion", then we both said together. The 'Big Push' is getting pushier and we both burst out laughing. However I was dreading going to see him after the last time we were together but Elijah was a best mate and also a comrade in arms so I owed it to him to see if he was alright. The girls came back in and we spent a pleasant afternoon together chatting and laughing about better times but behind this bohemia there was sadness about Rosie and the friends we had lost. We said goodbye to Bert and Mabel we shook hands as the two woman kissed each other Helen then went to kiss Bert and Mabel came over to kiss me she whispered in my ear. "I'm so glad for you and Helen but I'm surprised it took you this long after all you were made for each other." She kissed me on the cheek as my mouth hung open in surprise but she put a finger to my lips and smiled at me and then she and Bert were off down the path to catch their tram.

That night as we lay in bed together Helen said. "Listen Billy Boy we have nothing to be ashamed of we love each other completely so there can be no wrong in what we are doing." I kissed her wondering at the change that had come over Helen from the shy girl I once knew then I thought but we have all changed so much the old way of life in this country was gone for good and the people would never be the same again. I turned to her and told her. "Bert and I are going to see Elijah Mack tomorrow I heard he is home and it is only right that we pay him and his family a visit." Helen looked at me and I could see the love that gleamed in her eyes as she replied. "I think that's a wonderful idea Billy Boy it will do you good to get out of the house for a bit." I teased her saying. "So you are getting tired of me already now that you have had your wicked way with me you are going to cast me aside like a lepers fingers?" Helen giggled delightedly at this and said. "Yes that's right I do that to all my men", I grabbed her and tickled her until she was begging me to stop. In the morning when I awoke Helen was raised up on her elbow looking down at me with concern on her face she said. "You had another nightmare how long has this been going on for?" I replied. "They come and go but since I have been back here with you I don't get them as often sometimes they scare the life out of me but everyone gets them so please don't worry darling." She said. "I have to love if something hurts you then it hurts me I woke up and heard you shouting Charlie Slater's name you seemed to be reliving something that happened on Gallipoli. She took my hand and kissed it and then pressed it to her cheek saying. "I have never asked you about Gallipoli love and you have never told me but I think it's now time I knew you can't keep me wrapped in cotton wool all my life I have seen horrible things as well." Although I didn't want to go through everything again I knew she was right and when we were married Helen would have to live with my nightmares so it was only fair. So I began and told her everything I left nothing out and when I had finished my soul was raw and the tears flowed down my cheeks. She cradled me and soothed me saying. "My poor love you have had to suffer more than anyone should at any age let alone at yours I know you are very mature but even

so it is to much.” She carried on soothing me as best she could and I was glad I had told her but she would never understand the devils that haunted me.

We ate breakfast together and then Helen had to go home to visit her parents she told me. “I imagine my mother will want to know everything that is going on all the latest gossip and war news.” I said. “Giver her and your father my love and tell them not to worry too much about the war news because I’m sure in a while it will be better.” She looked at me inquiringly but I couldn’t say anything else yet then she left kissing me deeply to catch her tram. A short while later Bert turned up and we walked down the road and caught a tram into town I asked him as we rattled along. “What’s the latest news you have heard this morning about the war?” He replied. “Not much really only that the ‘Big Push’ is getting pushier and the ‘Major Offensive’ is getting more offensiver still”, and we both burst out laughing at this. We changed trams I town and caught one up to Higherscrop we both looked out the window at the dull grey smoke grimed terraced mill houses that permeated the district. We got off the tram and walked down a steep street with these shoebox houses on either side a couple of coves with flat caps and the look of hungry wolves about them followed us. But as we stopped outside Elijah’s house they moved past us saying a gruff “Morning.” The terraced house we stood in front of was just like the others only cleaner and a red pair of curtains gave the greyness of it a much needed lift. We knocked on the door and waited after a few minutes we knocked again and then we heard footsteps coming down the passage and then the door was opened.

Standing there surveying us was Tommy Macy Elijah’s mate who had been seconded to the Second Battalion as an instructor and who was now a skater* his face broke into a big smile on seeing us. He said. “How do lads its good to see you come on in I reckon Martha will be pleased to see you as well.” A voice shouted form somewhere in the house. “Who is it Tommy? Tell them to piss off and shut the door.” He ushered us in saying. “His nib’s is on one again he can be a real pain in the ass at times.” We walked down the passage with Tommy towards the backroom when the same voice shouted again. “Who the bloody hell have you got there I told you to get rid of them and instead you invite them in.” Then we heard another voice cutting across his and saying. “Be quite Elijah what will people think of us you shouting and bawling like that?” He replied. “Why should I care what people think of us I’ve given for my country so to hell with them and what they think.” I winced when I heard this and nearly turned round and left but Tommy was saying. “I’ve a surprise for you Elijah here’s Billy Boy and Bert come to see how you are doing.” We entered into the back room and it was cosy, bright and cheerful and loads of light flooded in through a big picture window at the back. Elijah was sat in a high backed chair with his legs up on an ottoman and a blanket covering them he turned his head towards the sound of us entering and said. “What the bloody hell do you two want?” This I feared was going to be worse than I dreamed and I had just put my hand on Bert’s arm to guide him out when I heard. “That’s enough Elijah Mack I won’t have you insulting guests in my house and especially not your comrades and mine your language.” Martha said to us. “Come on in lads and welcome you are have a seat and I will make some tea”, we sat down and she left the room to head to the kitchen.

I got my first good look at Elijah now the scars on his face where hideous and disfiguring but worse than this was his eyes which were a fish belly white with no pupils or irises and round the sockets the flesh was pitted and black from the explosive that had taken his sight. He looked like something that could be used to frighten children into being good but his face didn’t bother me I just felt terribly sad for him. He was one of my best friends and to see him suffering and in this frame of mind hurt me deeply but what was worse was that I knew he blamed me. Martha came back in carrying mugs of tea on a beer tray and handed them to us she then put milk and sugar on the table and told us to help ourselves. When we had all seen to our tea and sat back down she went our and came back with more ashtrays saying we could smoke if we wished so we all lit up and then waited. Martha turned to me and said. “I have not had the chance before Billy Boy but I would like to thank you for saving my Elijah.” Before I could form an answer Elijah had butted in saying. “Don’t thank

yon bastard he should have left me there to die instead of bringing me in and leaving me like this.” I saw the anger spring to Marta’s face and I heard the pain in her voice as she said. “You listen to me Elijah Mack and I won’t be saying this again I don’t care what you look like or that you can’t see as long as I have you safe back here and that’s what the children think as well.” I watched Elijah wince as she continued. “You and I owe that to Billy Boy and the fact that he didn’t give up but brought you back in even though he was seriously wounded doing it.”

Elijah’s face crumpled and although no tears would flow down that ruined face you could see them in his voice as he said. “Forgive me Martha for being a stubborn fool with too much pride I couldn’t bear to lose you and the children.” She crossed the room to him and hugged him to her saying. “We love you Elijah you are everything to us and there is no way we would ever leave you.” His head swung round to where Bert and I sat and he said. “Can you forgive an ungrateful fool for his bad manners and lack of acknowledgment lads?” We all looked at this ruin of a once proud and fit man and I think we all felt a little more humble. Elijah continued saying. “Thank you Billy Boy for bringing me in it’s because of what you did that I’m back with the family I adore will you shake the hand of one who did wrong to you?” I walked over to him and took his hand nearly shaking it off as I said. “You have always been my friend Elijah and friends help each other out I know that you would have done the same for me so no thanks are necessary.” We spent a very pleasant afternoon at Elijah’s and we regaled him Tommy and Martha with what had been going on in the Battalion and in France itself. Just before we went we told him and Tommy that we would be meeting up with Frank and Nobby tomorrow at the Intack Inn and we invited them along. Elijah smiled and it lit up his ruined face as he said. “I would like to catch up with the lads and to have a glass of ale again in a pub but what about this”, and he touched his face. I replied. “You got those wounds in the service of your country and anyone that says anything will have to deal with us”, Tommy and Bert both agreed with me. Then Tommy said. “Right we will be there I will bring Elijah down like he said it will be good to see some of the other lads.” We told them that we would be in about six o’ clock in the evening and then we shook hands and bid everyone goodnight. Martha saw us to the door and just as I was about to step out into the street she kissed my cheek saying. “Thank you this means so much to Elijah to be invited for a drink with you he feels he belongs again. I won’t pretend that it has been easy you have seen his black moods it will take him some time to get back to his old self but what has happened today is a step in the right direction.” I told Martha that both she and Elijah were welcome and then we said goodbye and walked back up the hill to catch our tram.

I said goodbye to Bert leaving him on the tram to go home to Mabel and his dad and reminding him that we would go down to the Intack Inn together tomorrow night. When I arrived home I found that Rosie had taken a turn for the worse and my heart skipped a beat as I feared that this was the end. I entered her bedroom and there was Helen and Dr Durkin he looked round and said. “Please wait outside Billy Boy until I have finished my examination off.” I replied. “Can you at least tell me how she is because I really need to know?” Helen came across and taking my hand led me from the room outside in the passage she said. “Listen love I won’t lie to you Rosie is very ill at the moment but she is a fighter and Dr Durkin will do the best he can now I must go back in and help.” She kissed me on the cheek and then opened the door and went back into the sickroom. I went to my room but I was like a cat on a hot tin roof I couldn’t settle and I smoked like a chimney sweating with fear and praying that Rosie would survive. I left the room and went downstairs to the kitchen I took a bottle of beer from the pantry and unscrewed the top pouring myself a glass and then I sat down at the table. I lit a fag and then took a good slug of the beer it tasted marvellous Beth came into the kitchen and sat with me we talked about Rosie and Beth said. “Don’t worry lad she is a fighter is Rosie and I have no doubt that she will get through this crisis.” Changing the subject I asked. “How’s Ma getting on with everything that has been happening I forgot to ask how she was has she improved any?” Beth took a drink from her mug of tea and said. “Not really she is in a world and a year of her own that we can’t be part of but she seems happy to be there I’m glad to say.” Then I asked. “How’s Charlie is he getting any better?” She blushed as she answered. “He’s a lot better than he was and he has been moved to a convalescent unit I go to see him pretty regular as it’s in

Arrington just up the road from here.” I told her that was champion but I looked at her closely as she blushed again thinking to myself there is more going on here than a platonic visit. I finished my beer and the Beth and I went upstairs together she went into Rosie’s room where Dr Durkin was still administering to her and I went back to my room. I undressed and climbed into bed not knowing when they would finish with Rosie I dozed for a bit then Helen came in and locked the door she looked worn out as she undressed and then she joined me in bed.

As I held her I said. “Tell me what’s happened Helen how is Rosie?” She looked into my eyes and replied. She is very serious love but she is holding her own and Dr Durkin has upped her pain medication so that should help ease her a little. At the moment Beth is sat with her and she is resting more comfortably but I must tell you love that she is not going to get better and it is all just a matter of time now so all we can do is wait and try to help when we can.” I swallowed and felt tears pricking my eyes so to stop myself from blubbing like a baby I pulled Helen to me and whispered in her ear. “What’s going on between Charlie Moffat and Beth because when I was in the kitchen with her she started blushing and preening herself when I mentioned him.” She smiled at me and replied. “Beth and Charlie have got a thing going between them they both needed someone and they found each other I think its rather romantic.” I looked at her shocked and said. “But she was going to marry Jack and now she is carrying on with his brother.” She looked at me and I could see the indignation on her face as she replied. “What’s wrong with that they both lost someone they loved and with Ma the way she is it just brought them together and I for one am glad it did they both deserve some happiness.” I knew that Helen was right as always then I told her that I would probably cancel the drink I was going to have with the lad’s tomorrow evening and that they would understand why. She told me not to be so daft and that there was nothing I could do for Rosie at the moment and that if she found out it would upset her. When I told her that me and Elijah were mates again and that he would be there she said. “That settles it you must go love and see the lads.” I replied. “Yes you’re probably right and I quite fancy a night with the lads.” I thought I saw a bit of jealousy in her eyes but I dismissed the idea as unworthy and on this last note we fall fast asleep in each others arms.

In the morning Helen had already got up and dressed and was about the house doing something when I arose so the first thing I did on getting dressed was to go and see how Rosie was. She was propped up in bed and looked washed out a wizened look had come to her face now which was just a pale yellow in colour. There was nobody with her at the moment and I said. Hello Rosie old girl how are you feeling today?” Her eyes fixed on mine and a small smile spread on her lips but she looked desperately tired and drawn I sat on the bed and took her hand in mine and looked into her eyes but she had gone again there was nobody at home. I suppose that this was the drugs the doctor was giving to her so I just sat and talked to her saying. “Well I will be meeting the lads for a drink later on this evening and I will be sure to tell them how you are as they will be asking. “ I got no response to this so I thought the pain medication must be doing its job. I continued saying. “Elijah’s going to be there me and him are friends again and the lads will be glad to see him.” I looked at the little wizened figure in the bed and picked up her tiny hand and kissed it was dry and rough and so hot it felt like she was on fire. I nearly cried but instead I said. “Do you remember all the cheek you used to give me and how I used to scold you for it well I would gladly give my own life to have that cheeky madam back who used to be such a pain in the neck. I looked down fondly at her and while we were alone I said to her. “The question you asked me about you and me last time well the answer would be yes if I and Helen had never met. Then my darling girl you and I would be sweethearts”, a tear rolled down my cheek and fell onto the bed covers. I continued I don’t know what I will do without you love you are my sister the one I never had and you are as dear to me as anyone could be”, and I stroked her red hot hand.

I heard something behind me and looked over to the bedroom door and saw Helen standing there as still as a statue. I cuffed the tears away from my eyes and cheeks quite roughly as I asked. “How long have you been standing there?” Helen came fully into the room she was carrying a bowl and some towels she replied. “Long enough to hear everything you said.” I started to protest but

Helen shushed me using her favourite hand gesture with her wrist cocked palm up like a copper telling you to halt. She put her load down and came over to me she kissed me on my upturned forehead saying. "I love you Billy Boy." At times just a few words can be so powerful that nothing else is needed and this was one of those times. I let go of Rosie's hand and stood up Helen said to me. "You will have to leave now love as I need to give Rosie a bed bath." Just before I left I turned to Helen saying. "She is so hot love I think there is something wrong again do you think I should get the doctor?" She looked at me with compassion in her eyes as she replied. "There is no need for a doctor it is just the fever running through her she will cool down when I wash her with this cold water", and she began to get things ready. I left the room and went down and had breakfast afterwards I knew that Beth and Helen would be busy so I just mooched around the house. But finally I got dressed in my uniform knowing I could no longer put off my duty I had to go and see Charlie Slater's parents. I dreaded going but I was with him when he was killed and he was a good mate so I knew that I owed him this at least. I walked down Nelson Street which was the next one along To General Gordon Street so I didn't have much time to compose my thoughts. I got to Charlie's door and knocked on it the door opened and a small lithe man stood there he had fair hair which was parted down the centre and his grey eyes looked out at me without recognition. I said. "Hello Sir my name is William Lamb I don't know if Charlie ever mentioned my name but I with him on Gallipoli and I told him that I would come And se you and Mrs Slater if anything ever happened. The man moved forward as fast as a greased rat and he took my hand nearly shaking it off as a smile of welcome lit up his sombre face as he said. "Of course our Charlie spoke of you and all the rest of the gang as he called them, come you in William and right glad it is to see you." I stepped over the threshold and into the passage but before I went any further Mr Slater stopped me saying. "I just want to tell you before you go in that the wife can be a bit much sometimes but bear with her lad its been hard for her and me as well", he stopped for a moment and then continued. "What with our Charlie being an only child the grief has addled her brain somewhat so like I say please make allowances for her", and he showed me through to the backroom.

I entered and saw a woman about the same size as Mr Slater but there the similarity ended for he was healthy and robust while his wife was the exact opposite. I took in everything from her prematurely grey hair to the sallow skin and pinched face whose complexion seemed to be waxy and then her dead brown eyes that looked out without any life in them. Mr Slater said. "Look who's here to see us Daisy its William one of our Charlie's pals who was with him in the Battalion." Her dead brown eyes looked straight through me and she did not move or even acknowledge me. I said. "Hello Mrs Slater I was a friend of Charlie's and I just thought that I would come round and offer my sympathies." She clasped her hands and her grip was that tight that I could see them beginning to turn white as she replied. "There is no Charlie anymore they murdered him my lovely boy they murdered him them and their dammed war." Mr Slater said. "Now come on Daisy William doesn't need to hear things like that." She went on as though he hadn't said anything. "Who are you and why are you still alive when my Charlie is dead?" I replied. "My name is William Lamb Mrs Slater and I was with your son on Gallipoli he asked me to come and see you." I stopped talking and looked at her but there was no response but then a screeching noise came from her throat that had me quite worried and she screamed. "Gallipoli that's where they killed my boy the bloody murderers my one and only lamb he was such a good boy to his mother", and spittle drooled down the side of her mouth. Then she screeched again. "Why are you here why weren't you killed instead of my precious boy you little bastard."

I sat there rooted to the spot and horrified at what I was witnessing and then the screeching started in earnest a long drawn out wail that seemed to go on and on. Mr Slater had to shout at me so I could understand him as he said. "This is not one of Ma's better days maybe it would be better if you left and didn't come back I am sorry lad but you can se how things are." He had hold of his wife now and gripped her while she keened he continued shouting. "See yourself out will you I have got my hands full here." I am not ashamed to admit that I fled back to the relative sanity of General Gordon Street I had no idea that grief could do that to a person. It was sobering and frightening to

think that losing a person could unhinge someone to that extent so that on reflection I felt only sorrow and compassion for the woman. I got home and went in I asked Beth how Rosie was but she was asleep again so I did not go up to see her and anyway I was still shook up from what had happened at the Salter's. I decided not to tell Helen what had happened as it would only upset her and she had enough on her plate looking after Rosie. Helen and I ate our evening meal together and Beth joined us as Rosie was still sleeping we tucked into a hotpot that Beth had made. It was a nice meal and the hotpot was superb and we chatted amicably between ourselves then it was time for me to get ready to go out. Shortly after Bert turned up with Mabel and she and Helen went into the front parlour their heads together and chattering like two parrots. Bet said. "Well are we right then we had better go and get the tram or we will be late and come in for some right stick. We walked into the front parlour and I said to the girls. "Right then we will be off." Helen stopped me saying. "Just a moment you two heroes we know you cant wait to see your mates but listen to what I'm saying Bert and Mabel are stopping here tonight." Helen fixed her eyes on us as did Mabel then she continued saying. "There is no point in the two of them trying to get back to Bert's house tonight especially in the state that you two will be in when you roll home." I was going to protest but Bert said. "Don't bother Billy Boy you can't win so let's just cut our losses and go before we are even more late besides which it is a good idea and we can all have breakfast together in the morning." We then took the girls into our arms and kissed them wishing them a good evening as they told us not to come back to drunk and then we left them chattering away like women do in the front parlour. We walked down to the tram stop and caught the next tram into town alighting at the stop across from the Intack Inn we ambled across the road and into the hostelry.

As we walked in I saw Joshua Tillman the landlord behind the bar but beside him instead of Anne there was a lass of about nineteen stood with him serving she was quite pretty and reminded me of someone although I couldn't put a name to her face. Then I heard a woman's voice shout. "Billy Boy come over here and give us a kiss I am so glad to see you again", it was Anne the landlady that had shouted over to me. When I went over to her I saw who the lass behind the bar reminded me of so I guessed that it was Anne's daughter Anne hugged me to her large bosom and kissed my cheek before saying. "I see you've noticed our Ivy then lads what do you think of her?" I replied. "She's very nice Anne but its no good me and Bert looking as we are already smitten with our own lasses and beside which she seems quite taken with our comrade", and I pointed to where Nobby Clark was in intimate conversation with the barmaid and obviously smitten by her Anne's mouth formed into an O as she looked over to where they seemed to be getting on like a house on fire. There was another shout from across the room it was Frank saying. "Bert, Billy Boy come on over here get your ale and come and sit down with us", I could see that Tommy and Elijah were sat with him. Anne said. "Go and join your friends I will come over and sit with you later on", and she kissed me on the cheek again then me and Bert made our way across to the lads. We shook hands all round then Frank said to us. "Come on lads grab a seat and lets make a night of it after all you never know we might not all be together again, Mr Tillman another round over here if you please?" Joshua Tillman stunned us with his next comment as he replied. "Alright lads stay there this round is on me just to show you how grateful the folks at home are for what you are doing for your country", he came across with our tankards on a tray and set them down in front of us telling us to enjoy. We took the head off the drinks and I said. "Its good to see you here Elijah now we can make a proper night of it." Bert and the rest shouted. "Hear, hear!" and Elijah beamed out at us from his ruined face. As we got more into the swing of things and the ale flowed the piano started up and the pub started to get more and more crowded and rowdy. All the old songs were sung and declarations of undying friendships were sworn none of which would be remembered come morning.

Whenever anyone came over to our table their first question was when's the 'Big Push' then?" By the end of the night I was beginning to get rather pissed off with this line of questions and then an arm chair General came over to us saying. "What it is it's this lad's, now if we attack along a wide front I don't think the Germans have the troops or the armaments to stop us." He took a swig of his whiskey and then continued. "I mean there are a lot of people writing that the Germans don't

have enough men, guns or food to continue the war so if we give them one good push now they will be finished. I turned to this would be Staff Walla and said to him. "Why the fuck don't you just fuck off and take your 'Big Push' with you." I looked him in the eye before continuing. "By the way who are we that are going to attack I know one thing it wont be you because you're not a soldier oh no you will be safe here in England. I will tell you something else as well you have never heard a shot fired in anger let alone anything else so just piss off and leave us fighting soldiers alone we don't need your stupid fucking advice." The wind bag pushed off his face scarlet and sweat breaking out on his brow his ego had been deflated and like all cowards he had retreated he must have thought he was dealing with new recruits or something though he now knew better. The lads cheered and whistled as they congratulated me on deflating that pompous clown and Anne came across and sat between me and Elijah. She gave him a kiss on the cheek which I reckon made his night though he said. "Thanks for that Anne but you didn't have to do it." She replied. "You listen to me Elijah Mack I wanted to do it and no one deserves a kiss more." Elijah smiled and continued. "Thanks as well lads for inviting me to join you I haven't had so much fun in years." Anne turned to him and said. "Good we will make this a regular thing Joshua will pick you up at the same time very week and Billy the pot man will take you home at night and I want no arguments." Elijah replied. "There's no need to put anyone out Anne we will make it a regular night but I have enough mates up at Higherscrop to fetch me down here and take me back." We all patted him on the back and told him it would be good for him to get out every week and the Intack was the best place he could come.

We ordered another round and toasted Elijah and Anne and told them to think of us when they sat down on their regular night. Elijah said. "We will raise a toast to you lads every time we meet until the war is won and all of you return home." We were silent for a while then as each one of us thought about our own mortality and our chances of returning home whole bodied and alive. To tell the truth who was better than us soldiers to weigh up the odds for it was us who knew that the chances of coming back were slim but if you had the luck who could tell. Anne suddenly said. "Come on lads you've got faces like a wet weekend are we here to enjoy ourselves or what it's my round", and she shouted over to Mr Tillman to fetch the ale. He came across with the round and unusual for him when his wife bought a round a smile on his face. He put the ale down and said to us. "I hear there's going to be a 'Big Push' on across the water?" Frank replied. "It will be no more pushy than usual and that's a fact." Joshua Tillman continued. "No you don't understand this new offensive your going to be taking part in is the final battle of the war." I told him. "I will tell you that you know more than us and that's for sure because we haven't heard anything." He did a double take and asked. "Are you lot taking the piss or what you must have heard about it because everybody over here has it's in all the papers you know." Bert joined in saying. "Then it must be true but like we told you Mr Tillman we don't know anything about it and that's a fact."

He sat down and said. "Well knock me down with a barmaids apron I better fill you lads in our Ivy can watch the bar for a bit that's if she can pull herself away from your mate." We all groaned when he said this for the last thing we needed was another armchair General telling us what was what and how to win the war. His wife glared at him saying. "Now Joshua the lads are here to relax and they don't need you spoiling their night with a load tittle tattle that you've read in the papers or heard from your cronies at the bar." But there was no stopping him as he said. "Now look lads there is going to be one last 'Big Push' against the old Hun that will win the war for us." We all groaned loudly again at this statement but he continued. "No listen we will have so much artillery and ammunition that the Hun will be blasted into submission." Frank replied. "That will be a first, because I've never known us to have enough artillery or even shells to do anything let alone blast the enemy into surrender." Joshua Tillman looked at him round eyed as he said. "This time it will be different believe me and do you know what?" He tapped the side of his nose whispering. "I even know when it will take place how about that then." I think he desperately wanted us to ask him when the attack would take place but he must have been desperately disappointed because not on of us said a word. He told us anyway but then he had to or he would have burst as he said. "It will be in July

lads you remember that when you're back over there and marching to victory that it was Joshua Tillman that told you when we would finish off the Hun."

He stood up looking triumphant and then walked back to the bar to serve and be with his cronies again. Frank said. "Do you ever get the feeling that everyone knows something you don't and that you really should", we all agreed with what he had said. Then Elijah leaned forward and turned his face towards us saying. "I will tell you something lads it doesn't bode well if there is a big offensive planned because if all these civvies know about it and when it is going to happen then it stands to reason that the Hun does as well?" We thought about this and realised he was right security on the 'Big Push' as everyone was calling the offensive must have been non existent and that was bad news for us. But what the hell there was nothing we could do about it and the Germans would be watching our troop build up anyway so we said sod it and ordered more ale and then Anne got us all singing again. Then Ivy and Nobby came over to join us and Ivy sat down right on my knee crushing my wedding tackle as she did causing a whoosh of breath to escape my lips. It was Anne that said. "Get up my girl you have done Billy Boy an injury and anyway he is already spoken for and that's a fact. Another thing is if he wasn't my girl and I was ten years younger I would be the first one after him", and she stood up and flounced up to the bar. Everyone broke out laughing and I blushed like a new bride but for the rest of the evening Ivy would throw me provocative smiles and winks whenever she caught my eye. The evening ended well and now there were only a few of us left in the pub finally it was time for us to leave and we got up to go Anne and Ivy were weeping and there were kisses all round and the kiss that Ivy gave me was anything but a peck on the cheek. It was like having a leech stuck to your lips and in the end I had to lever her off just to catch my breath. We asked Anne to say goodbye to Mr Tillman who had disappeared earlier on he said to change his shirt but who had not reappeared since. Anne told us that the shirt thing happened quite often and that he would be in bed now snoring his head off but rest assured she would give him our best. We left the Intack and lurched on our way for our trams, Frank, Tommy and Elijah where going the opposite way to Nobby, Bert and I. We all shook hands and went our different ways and then Frank said. "The next time I see you will be on the train lads." This had the effect of sobering us up knowing that we would be heading back to France in three days and then Tommy said. "I will see you over there soon as well lads as some of us are rejoining the Battalion along with some new faces to make it up to strength." We all cheered Tommy and told him how glad we would be to have him back in the Battalion where he belonged.

Just before we finally parted Elijah called me to him he put his hand out and I took it he gripped hard saying. "I'm sorry for the way I acted before I hoe you will find it in your heart to forgive me for you have always been a good pal." He patted my hand now and continued. "I wish I was going with you lot and the battalion I really do, I would like to thank you for coming to the house and for inviting me down here its been great being part of the lads again even if it was only for one night." I replied. "You will always be part of the lads Elijah no matter where we are and I will tell you something there is no one I would rather have beside me in a tight spot than you." He hugged me to him and said. "God keep you Billy Boy and remember keep your head down and never volunteer", and we stepped away from each other. Then it was time to finally go and we cheered each other until we were out of sight then we caught our tram and made our way home. We were all a bit worse for wear and me and Bert took the rise out of Nobby for his failure to get off with Ivy Tillman. Bert looked at me owl eyed and said. "She was up for it wasn't she Billy Boy and what happens Nobby is with us on the tram instead of in her arms kissing?" Nobby scowled and muttered something under his breath so Bert lent over saying. Speak up Norberto we can't hear what you're bloody saying." Nobby shouted. "She was more interested in Billy Boy than she was in me making eyes at him all-night like a sick cow." I refuted this as I replied. "Listen Nobby if you can't keep a lass that's your fault I told her and so did Anne that I wanted nothing to do with her and that I was in love with someone else and if she can't take the hint then that's tough shit." He went back to sulking and I thought fuck him as though I would be interested in Ivy when I had Helen waiting for me at home. Why settle for dripping when you could get roast beef I was in a hurry now to get away from

Nobby and back home to Helen and sleep. The tram rattled on and then Nobby got up and smiled ruefully at us he shook hands with each of us and we told him we would see him at the station in three days and with this promise he got off. That just left me and Bert who were much the worse for the drink we had consumed and we tried hard not to slur our words as we talked. Our stop arrived and we got off and staggered onto General Gordon Street with our arms around each others shoulders to stop us falling over and it was here Bert stopped me and said. "You are my best mate Billy Boy but I need to tell you something", he sighed wearily then he let go of me and continued saying. "Hit me if you want because I deserve it", and he threw his arms out wide overbalanced and sat down on his ass on the pavement. I was laughing as I went to pull him up but that changed as I ended up beside him on the floor. I asked. Why would I want to punch you Bert you are my best friend?"

As we sat there in drunken contemplation he took a deep breath and said. "It's because of Mabel you see Billy Boy she thought she was pregnant but it was only a scare. I know how much the girls mean to you so if you want to punch me go ahead", he looked so dejected there sitting on the pavement. I knew he was only like this because he was drunk and in his cups so I replied. "Look Bert you and Mabel love each other a blind man could see that and you are old enough and engaged so why shouldn't you enjoy the fruits of your love I mean that can't be wrong can it?" He looked at me through blood shot eyes and said. "You are right Billy Boy thank you for understanding and being a true pal", and he wrung my hand. We eventually and with a lot of effort managed to get to our feet again but it took some time until we stood there swaying at the end of the street. We then set off purposefully for the house but this entailed more than we thought and it took quite some time as we took one step forward and two back. Eventually though we reached the gate of 123 and Bert said. "Please allow me", and with a flourish he went to open the gate. This did not happen though instead he managed to fall over the gate and land in a heap on the other side of it so for the second time that night I had to get him back on his feet again. We got to the front door and I managed to prop him up while I got my key out I then tried to put it in the lock but for some reason it wouldn't go in. I was having real problems as the key seemed to have a mind of its own tracing patterns round the locks opening but refusing to fit in it and open the bloody thing. I thought we were going to be there all night but the door opened as though by magic and we fell inside crawling on our hands and knees. Finally we managed to shove ourselves erect using the wall for support it was then that we found ourselves looking into the glaring eyes of our loved ones who were standing there with disapproval written all over their faces.

Mabel went first saying. "Look at the state of you Albert Hall how dare you come back here falling down drunk and crawling along the floor?" Bert had a sloppy grin on his face as she continued. "Just because you are on leave doesn't mean you can act like a sot and go showing decent people up." In my befuddled state I thought that I would try to calm everything down and explain so I said. "Listen Mabel its like this", but before I could say anymore she cut me off saying. "You can shut your face William Lamb it's probably your fault that he's in this state in the first place I should have known better than to let him out with you and the lads." My mouth fell open as I protested my innocence I mean bloody hell I was younger than him so I said. "How can you blame everything on me I didn't tell him to drink like he did", I was going to carry on defending myself when Helen joined in saying. "Shut up William no one wants to hear what you have to say not in your drunken state." I knew then that I was in big trouble Helen must have been livid to use my first name but then I thought what the hell why is she blaming me it just wasn't fair. Mabel kept going on and I thought for fuck sake woman shut up then she grabbed Bert's arm and dragged him upstairs but nor before he called out. "See you for breakfast in the morning Billy Boy did we have a good time or what I've had a right gradley night and no mistake with you and the lads", poor Bert this last comment got him a smack round the head and a push up the stairs. That left just me and Helen standing there I was going to try to explain to Helen that these things happen when she said. "Not another word get up to bed before I get really mad." I trudged up the stairs my head hung low like a dog that had taken a beating I was a little unsteady on my feet but I eventually made it as Helen followed behind like a hangman.

We got into my room and I sat down on the bed and began a rambling apology but before I could say much Helen had taken my boots off and before long she was stripping me of the rest of my uniform. My jacket and shirt then she pushed me back on the bed and took off my trousers and before I knew it I had lost my undergarments and I led there as naked as the day I was born as she said. "Now get into bed and no arguments", as meek as a lamb I obeyed her. She the undressed herself and climbed in beside me I thought bloody hell this is going to be colder than a polar bears chuff piece but I was in for a surprise. Helen gathered me into her arms and held me tight as I said. "So you are not mad at me then for getting drunk with the lads?" She whispered in my ear. "How could I be mad at you love after all you have been through did you think I would begrudge you some time with your pals me and Mabel only acted that way to have laugh." I heaved a sigh of relief as I asked. "So Mabel and Bert are alright I mean he's not in trouble either because I can tell you from the way she acted I thought he was for the high jump but I take it that's not the case?" She replied. "No he will be just fine and who knows he might even get lucky", but I heard no more as I fell into a deep ale induced sleep.

I woke up in the morning with a mouth into which I thought a dead ferret had crawled and a sour feeling in my gut that made my stomach flip over doing somersaults. I never get headaches like most people do when they have a hangover but I'm always starving the next morning after a goodnight out. I saw that Helen had already gone downstairs so I got up had a quick wash and shave threw on some old civvies and followed her down. Everyone was sitting round the kitchen table as I entered and I wished them a good morning, Helen came over to me and said. "Sit down and I will get your breakfast we have some lovely kidneys to go with the bacon and I'm sure you will enjoy them", she went to the range and began to dish out my breakfast as I sat down. Bert glanced up from his plate saying. "What do you think of this pair then pal fooling us like that last night I will tell you what I nearly messed my pants when Mabel started giving me hell." I replied. "They were good there is no doubt about that I must admit I really thought I was in the doghouse." Bert said with a wink. "Do you know I never knew that the ale in the Intack was so strong I mean we only had three tankards and we got into that state?" Mabel looked at him saying. "Eat your breakfast before it gets cold and give Billy Boy a chance to have he's there will be plenty of time for you two to reminisce latter." Helen served my breakfast putting it down in front of me then she poured me a mug of tea saying. "There that should set you up so get it down you and then you and Bert can go for a smoke while Mabel and I clear away the things and get some tidying up done." She left the kitchen with Mabel in tow as I tucked into my breakfast which I must admit I found extremely tasty. After I finished Bert and I went into the front parlour where the girls had already lit the fire I offered my cigarette case and we lit up then Bert said. "About last night I have the vague feeling that I confided something very personal about me and Mabel?" He looked a bit sheepish after saying this and I replied. "You did pal but don't worry my lips are sealed it will stay between me and you no one else needs to know." I saw relief flood his face as he told me. "You have saved my life Billy Boy I don't know what Mabel would have said if she found out but you really are a good friend", and a grin broke out on his lighting up his face.

Later on Bert and Mabel went back to his house we would have gone with them only his father had gone to look after a sick uncle so Helen and I went to the 'Electric Palace' which was a moving picture house and was the only one left open in town I cant remember what we saw but there was some newsreels of the war which I found quite interesting if a bit false and staged. Then on the way out we saw the biggest shit in town as I heard. "Hello Helen how are you Billy Boy?" Then there stood in front of us was Tommy Smith who you may recall was a one time rival for Helens affection. I saw he was dressed in uniform which surprised me the last thin I would have expected from him was to join up because he was a selfish little bastard to say the least. Helen nodded at him and I replied. "Hello Tommy I see that you've joined up finally?" He smiled and said. "Oh yes I'm with the 2nd Battalion but I stand in awe of you and your exploits on Gallipoli which people never seem to stop talking about", he made this sound like the insult it was meant to be. The final straw came however when he commented to us. "I really didn't think you two would still be walking out as I never thought that you were that well suited for each other I always thought you would be better off

with me”, he then leered at Helen and this was to much I hit him once with a hammer blow to the chin. He sailed backwards and ended up in a heap on the pavement dead to the world Helen looked shocked but I then said to his mates. “You had better pick him up and take him to the Infirmary I might just have broken his jaw”, his friends looked at me wanting no part of the fight and then went over to where he lay. The last thing I saw of him they had hoisted him up and were carrying him off with blood pouring from his smashed mouth accompanied by gurgling and whistling sounds as he tried to breath.

Just then a policeman came along asking what had happened Helen took my arm and we walked off down the road without a backward glance. As we walked along Helen said. “My god love I thought you had killed him the way he led on the ground without moving”, and she looked at me out the corner of her eye. I stopped and swung towards her as I replied. “He deserved it so don’t ask me to feel sorry for a little swine like that when better men are dying right now.” She shook her head as she said. “I know he did and to tell you the truth I never could stand him too smarmy by half.” I decided that I would have a joke with her as I asked. “What not even when you were walking out with him I find that very hard to believe?” Her hand came out in the gesture that I adored as she replied. “We only walked out twice and then I thought never again he was all hands he even tried to put one of them up my skirt and that was the last time I can tell you.” I was dying to laugh at her indignation but instead I said. “Oh so I se you got rid of him well I cant say as I blame you I mean trying to get his hand between your legs that would put you off but was that the only reason?” I gave her my best integrating smile when I had first started she looked a bit mad but now a grin came to her face as she replied. “No it wasn’t the only one in fact there was a lad that I was quite taken with and he seemed really nice although now I’m questioning if I was right to let him court me?” I was quite taken by her answer which is what I had been waiting for and I bragged. “I knew all along that you had taken a shining to me it must be my good looks and charm that clinched it.” Helen then deflated my ego in seconds saying. “No not really its just that I would not leave anyone in the hands of Victoria Smelt all I did was simply rescue you from a fate no one deserves”, she had turned the tables on me and I must admit that I didn’t like it one bit. I changed the subject. “Lets not dwell on the past I tell you what shall we have a bite of supper before retiring?” We walked along arm in arm to the tram stop and now I could feel the soreness in my fist but it felt good as everything does when a job has been well done. The tram came and we caught it home and we entered 123, General Gordon Street in good heart and content with each other and the moment.

Chapter Fifteen

As we entered the hallway I saw a black frockcoat and top hat on the hall stand Helen looked at them and her face went white as she said. “Those are Dr Durkin’s things Rosie must have taken a turn for the worse.” We ran up the stairs to Rosie’s room and Helen entered I was following when she stopped me saying. “No Billy Boy if this is bad Rosie won’t want you to see and neither will Dr Durkin I will tell you as soon as I can what’s happening.” She entered the room shutting the door behind her I knew she was right in what she had said but I was left to smoke and pace the corridor and I almost ended up climbing the walls as I waited for any news. I had been there for about half an hour when Helen came out of the room. I asked. “What’s wrong with her you have to tell me Helen?” She replied. “She has had another bad turn but Dr Durkin has relieved the symptoms for the moment and she is resting more comfortably now there is not much more we can do for her love but I and the doctor are going to stay with her tonight.” I said. “Then I will wait out here I cant leave her in her hour of need”, and I looked down at the carpet close to tears. Helen took my hand saying. “Listen love there is nothing you can do out here go back to the room and get some rest.” I knew once again she was right so I didn’t argue with her instead I went back to the room I tried to sleep but

I couldn't because of the worry and in two days I was due to return to France so I ended up smoking through the night. At first light Helen came into the room tired and drawn she undressed and climbed into bed beside me I gathered her into my arms and she laid her head on my chest. She said. "Rosie will be alright for now the crisis has passed for the moment I'm glad to say." I kissed the top of her head as I replied. "Thank god for that I was worried sick but that's a weight off my mind for now." I continued saying. "Now you better get some sleep or you will be ill as well and I couldn't bear that." She tried to talk for a while but I soon heard the smooth sound of her breath as she drifted into the sleep that she so obviously needed I stayed awake a while longer and then I too drifted off into a deep sleep.

It was mid afternoon when we awoke so we washed and got dressed and went down stairs to the kitchen Beth was there and she said to us. "There are a couple of chops in the oven they should be right in about ten minutes then there are some spuds ready for mashing that pan there peas in the other one and gravy on the back burner simmering." Helen turned to Beth with a look of affection saying. "How do you do it Beth you are a life saver and me and is lordship here will feast like royalty thanks to you", and they hugged each other. I said to Beth. "Thank you I really don't deserve all this but it is sweet of you to do it." She replied quite waspishly I thought. "I didn't do it for you I did it for Helen poor girls run off her feet and she hasn't the time to start making your meals. However I will nip out after to get something special for your tea tonight so you can all sit down and have slap up feed together." She laughed at the expression on my face as she continued. "Mabel is sitting with Rosie at the moment and Bert's coming here tonight and will be staying until you both go back mind you the things you young ones get up to its enough to make me blush", and she smiled at us both. Helen blushed bright red and I was left speechless as Beth breezed out of the kitchen like galleon under full sail laughing like hell. I would not have thought it possible that she could have changed so much for the better after the time she had been through but she had. The comparison between the old Beth and this new one was unbelievable I never thought I would see her happy again and I knew that when Charlie came home finally we would not be the only ones to share a bed together.

We had a leisurely lunch and then we went back upstairs Helen told me that she would go in and sit with Mabel and Rosie so I said I would join her and say hello and see how she was. Helen entered Rosie's room and I was just following when I heard. "If that's Billy Boy tell him to come back and see me in the morning when I'm looking and feeling better I will talk to him then", and I heard a lot of coughing as Helen turned to me. I said. "That's alright I heard alright, Rosie I will come and see you in the morning." The coughing started again and I heard Mabel say to me from inside the room. Bert will be here any moment why don't you go downstairs and wait for him Billy Boy?" I replied. "Alright Mabel I will do seeing as the old harridan in there doesn't want to see me", and I turned from the door and walked downstairs. About ten minutes later there was a knock at the door I answered it and there stood Bert with all his kit I said. "Come on in pal and dump your stuff in the front parlour your just in time to have a beer." Bert dumped his stuff and we adjourned to the kitchen where we had a couple of beers and a fair few smokes Bert started to tell me that him and Mabel were stopping here but I told him I already knew. He said it was best with his dad still away that Mabel was here she would give the girls a hand until his father returned and then she would return to Bert's. It was now getting on for evening and Beth came into the kitchen to make our special meal seeing as this would be our last evening one here she kicked us out saying she couldn't work with us under her feet. So we ended up in the front parlour just chatting and relaxing in each others company until the girls came down and went into the kitchen. Beth came in and said. "I hope that you enjoy your special meal I'm just going up to be with our Rosie and give her something to eat." I jumped up and kissed her on the cheek saying. "Thanks for everything Beth I know how much you have on your plate at the minute and we rally appreciate what you have done for us." Bert jumped up and kissed her on the other cheek as Beth blushed and said. "Nonsense it was worth it just to get kisses off two handsome soldiers", and she left the room laughing to go and see to Rosie.

The girls were stood in the kitchen as we entered and Mabel said. "Here's a meal fit for heroes and no mistake." The girls served us putting down plates on which was steak and potatoes with carrots, peas and gravy, Helen poured us two beers and whispered in my ear. "There's jam roly-poly for afters I know that you will enjoy that." My god I thought steak I hadn't seen anything like this in ages and jam roly-poly for afterwards it wasn't as though things were at starvation levels yet but the food situation was getting tight. So really Beth had worked a miracle with this meal and had even got enough so the girls could join us I had to say something so I said. "Here's to good old Beth for getting us this steak I really didn't think we would be able to get any." Bert joined in as we toasted her saying. "Hear, hear and I will tell you something else it tastes marvellous there is a real tang to it that really complements it." I nodded my head in total agreement as Mabel shattered everything by saying. "You can't get steak anymore and even if you could it would cost a lot more than we could afford." I replied don't talk nonsense Mabel Beth managed to get some and we are eating it now and I say good on her." Helen turned to me and said. "Listen my love we are all eating steak but it comes from a horse not a cow", and they both laughed. Bert and I looked at them thinking they were joking but we realised they weren't then Bet replied. "Horse or no bloody horse it tastes so good who cares", and me and him grinned at each other and finished our plates. We really enjoyed that meal even if it did turn out to be horse meat instead of proper steak I know that I had certainly eaten worse than this so it didn't bother me and Bet didn't seem concerned either. We watched and chatted to the girls as they washed up and then they shoed us out while they cleaned the kitchen. So we took a couple of beers into the front parlour and had a drink and a smoke while the girls finished their work they came in shortly after and we played cards for a bit. After a while we stopped and just chatted as good friends do then we had a few more beers and smokes and finally without anyone saying anything we made our way to bed. We told Bert and Mabel that we would see them in the morning for breakfast and then later on we would all go to the station together.

Helen and I went to bed and held each other tight we whispered sweet nothings in each others ears the silly little things that lovers do. I told her that she was the only woman I would love in this lifetime or the next and that we had been blessed to have found a love like this. She said that she loved me more than life itself but that if it hadn't been for the war we would still be at the hand holding stage of our courtship or maybe we might have got round to prim kissing. I agreed with her we might have kissed each others cheek or maybe even lips but this would have gone on for year after year until we wed. She said. "The war has changed everything love and speeded things up you must take chances now because death and destruction is all round us. It is women that have moved on though they are more in charge of their own destiny now and the old values that we used to hold as sacred are worthless now when you are faced with the possibility of losing your loved one." I held her tight and replied. "Yes things can only change for the better after what we are going through and like they say at the end of it there will be a land fit for heroes that is partly why we are fighting the old order is gone." After this we made love one last time slowly and tenderly and then we went to sleep sated and clinging to each other like the children we were but for once when my eyes closed the nightmares stayed away. In the morning I was up early but so was Helen I gave her the belated Christmas present that I had brought home with me and she gave me hers. It was a lovely locket with a picture of her face and a lock of her midnight black hair I put it on and it lay against my skin she kissed it and told me it would always protect me. I gave her the enamelled ring with the emerald in it that I had got in Egypt I slipped it onto her ring finger and it fitted a treat I was glad to see. She held it out in front of her admiring it I could tell that she really liked it she put it to her lips and kissed it then she kissed me hard on my mouth she stepped back saying. "I love it Billy Boy but does this mean that we are engaged?" She held it out to me showing which finger it was on and I waited for the smile to come that would show me she was joking but it never came instead I saw a look of hop and love on her beautiful face. I didn't know what to say and thoughts whizzed through my head were we too young and I answered myself no she was the only woman I would ever love there would never be anyone else so I replied. "Of course it does my love if you will have me that is", and tears coursed down both our cheeks. She came into my arms and whispered. "You are the only man that I

would ever marry I love you more than life itself I'm so happy", and she rushed out to show the rest of the females of the house.

Meanwhile I got my stuff together and then I looked at the beautiful girl in the locket that had just consented to be my bride and I pinched myself to make sure it was true. I went downstairs and had breakfast with Bert and the rest he shook my hand and the slapped me on the back saying. "Congratulations Billy Boy it couldn't have happened to a nicer couple you belong together." Mabel stood up and came round the table throwing her arms round me and kissing me as she said. "Well done I have never seen Helen looking happier you two are made for each other and its time you cemented that fact who cares about how young you are as long as it feels right. With things the way they are at the moment you grab your happiness where you can." Helen came in holding her hand out and still admiring the ring she looked radiant and I couldn't stop smiling thinking how lucky I was. She looked at me and said. "Billy Boy go up and see Rosie she is waiting to talk to you upstairs in her room", so I left my fiancé in the kitchen and went upstairs to see my other love that was dying. Beth kissed me as she left Rosie's room whispering. "I'm over the moon for the pair of you you're a smashing couple made for one another so don't ever let each other go and you keep your head down out there" and I saw a shadow pass behind her eyes. I kissed her on the forehead and walked past her into the room Rosie was propped up in bed and looked better than I had seen her in a while. I don't know what it was but the pinched look had gone to be replaced by softness and translucence to her skin that made her look beautiful even the yellow had faded so you could hardly see it. She said. "Come and sit beside me love I have a few things to say to you and not much time to say them in."

I sat down on the bed and she began by saying. "I'm so glad that you and Helen have got engaged I love you both dearly and I was wrong when I told you before that you were both to young." Tears rolled down her face as she continued. "I know now that what you are doing is right life is to short for anything else believe you me." She started coughing again and I held her to me she felt like a little bird frail and tiny then I gave her a drink of water she took a sip and settled down. Then she told me. "Oh Billy Boy how I wish it was you and me that were engaged but that wasn't to be and you and Helen are made for each other and that's how it should be." She stopped and took a laboured breath saying. "I'm getting tired now but before I let you go there are two things that I must tell you before it is to late. The first thing is that I love you with all of my heart and that will never change not even after I'm gone." She smiled at me before continuing as she said. "The second thing is watch out for Tommy Smith please Billy Boy he hates you and it's an unnatural hate. Helen told me you knocked him out and might have broken his jaw good I'm glad", and she laughed but then started coughing again. When she had settled down she said to me. "Watch out love because this will make him twice as dangerous now and he will try harder than ever to get his revenge on you", her voice trailed off. I replied. "Never you mind about Tommy bloody Smith I know how to take care of him if he tries anything I will knock him flat again. Anyway I won't see him because he is with the 2nd Battalion and not ours." Rosie was getting agitated now and it wasn't doing her any good as she said. "You don't understand I know him believe you me and he is evil and he has the gift of the gab so never let him get into a position were he can use it against you." I looked down at her and thought I know how to take care of him alright in a way that he would understand with my fists so I told Rosie. "I know the lad and like I say I will take care of him but why should he hate me so bad I have never done anything to him much?"

She shook her head and replied. "Because of Helen of course he has never gotten over her dropping him and he never will he loves her with a demented evil love and he will never forgive you because she loves you so much", she coughed again but it soon subsided. I was watching her now and I held her hand saying. "How do you know what Tommy Smith thinks you hardly know him so how could you possibly know the things you have said?" She looked at me and tears started to run from her eyes as she replied. "Because he told me while he raped me that's how I know how much he hates you." My jaw dropped open and a red mist formed before my eyes as I screamed. "He raped you the little bastard I will kill him I will snap his fucking dirty little neck", and I stood up ready to

make good my promise. I could hardly speak never had I been so angry it was all encompassing it washed over me like paint and soaked into my very soul I thought that I might go mad But Rosie stopped me saying. "Do you not think that I would have had him put in prison for what he did if I could have proved that he raped me the trouble was that it was half my fault in a way" I protested but she shushed me. Then another cough racked her body and she shook in what I thought was a fit but as I was about to send for Helen it passed. She continued with the story. "It happened last Christmas when I came down to the station to see you off" and she smiled at me as she remembered it. Then she said. "I was so envious of Helen god forgive me that's why I kissed poor Charlie Slater to make you jealous but it didn't you never even noticed." I replied. "I am so sorry Rosie I had no idea really at that time how you felt about me." She looked horrified at this and responded by saying. "No please don't be it wasn't Helen's fault or yours it was mine and as for Charlie well there's no doubt I will probably see him shortly and I will apologise", I gave her another sip of water and she sighed.

She settled back now saying. "That's better now what was I saying oh yes the station Helen and the rest were going home and Mabel asked if I was going with them but I reckon the devil was in me because I said no I needed some things in town really I just wanted to be alone." Another cough rattled her chest as she continued. "Mabel had just gone when this lad came up he seemed quite presentable and was in uniform he asked me if I had just seen someone off. I said yes it was you and the rest of the gang but I was still wary." Rosie's breathing was now coming in short gasps labouring to inflate her lungs and she stopped for a moment as I said to her. "You don't have to tell me all this now it is obviously upsetting you and wearing you out as well." She shook her head saying. "No I must tell you now, anyway he said I know Billy Boy well we worked together at the foundry and he is a good mate of mine and by the way my name is Tommy Smith and I am very pleased to meet you." I gave her more water as she stopped for breath again before continuing. "Oh he was a sweet talking devil alright I was about to introduce myself when he said you must be Rosie Moffat. I was impressed as I looked at him and asked how did you know that? Oh he replied Billy Boy often talked about you and I must admit that his description of you was spot on you are beautiful." I looked at my darling Rosie and thought the little fucking bastard tricking her like that by using my name I now knew that when I next saw him I would kill him. She laughed and then coughed saying. "He asked me if we could go out on Friday night to the 'Picture Palace' then he said he was sure that you would like him to look after me as you were such good friends and you would do the same for him. He seemed so charming and plausible and he was supposed to be a pal of yours and so I said yes and to tell the truth I was feeling lonely everyone seemed to have someone but me but little did I know what he was really like." The red haze was forming in my eyes again and Tommy Smith would not know what hit him when I got hold of him. Rosie went on. "He called for me that Friday night and he was the perfect gentleman but what I didn't know was that he had planned everything in advance and I was going along unknowingly with everything."

I offered her more water and she took a sip and smiled at me saying. "Anyway Helen had gone back to the hospital at Manchester Mabel was spending more and more time round at Bert's with his father and Beth was looking after Ma." I could have screamed when I realised how easy it was for the little shit to worm his way in Rosie continued. "Well we went out a few times and he was always the gentleman and always behaved so about the fourth time we had been out he said his mother and father were away and would I like to come to his house on Saturday for a drink? I could see nothing wrong with going and having a drink so I said yes why not and in doing this I played right into his hands although I obviously didn't know it at the time." I asked her. "Why on earth did you do that what ever possessed you it was a really silly thing to do?" Now she got mad and spat. "It's alright for you sitting there saying things like that where were you when I needed you off playing bloody soldiers that's where." Her breathing was getting quite shallow now and I was worried so I didn't bother replying she looked at me as her breathing settled down and said. "I'm sorry Billy Boy I know it's not your fault it's just that I'm so mad at myself for being so gullible and I'm taking it out on you." She held my hand and I could feel how hot she was again I wanted to stop her but she continued saying. "I don't know what it was call it nosiness call it devilment but on Saturday night

he picked me up and we went back to his house.” She stopped again to catch her breath and then went on. “Well everything went well at first and I was really enjoying myself we had a couple of drinks and enjoying his company anyway he must have done something to my drink because after the second I felt really funny. He asked me if I was alright and he seemed quite concerned I said I felt really tired which I did but I put it down to the shift work at the factory.” A whole lot of coughs now wracked her body again and I said to her. “That’s enough I’ve a good idea what went on so you can rest now alright.” She laughed and replied. “In a while I will get all the rest that I will ever need so just listen to me I must tell you, he took me upstairs into a bedroom and told me there was a bed in here that I could use until I was feeling better.”

She shook her head and continued. “Anyway he didn’t leave and at first I thought that’s sweet he’s looking after me but that was the last thing on his mind. He started to take my clothes off I tried to fight him but he held a butchers knife to my throat and told me he would kill me if I resisted.” I was absolutely livid as I listened to what Rosie had told me but she wasn’t finished as she said. “I would have fought on and tried to injure him but I looked into those evil eyes of his and knew that he meant what he said he would have killed me. Then he squeezed my bare breast so hard it brought tears to my eyes and he said who will believe a slut like you when you come to a lad’s house by yourself when you know his parents are away. I knew he was right nobody would believe me so I let him take the rest of my clothes off and did everything he told me to do I will not go into everything he did because I’m too ashamed.” There were tears now in my dear Rosie’s eyes as she continued saying. “Anyway he hurt me Billy Boy and while he was making me do these revolting things he kept saying this is for that bastard William Lamb tell him how easy you are and to try you now I’ve broke you in. He will enjoy a slut like you after all he already has one but I bet she doesn’t know how to please a man like you do now.” I knew now that nothing on earth could save the fucking shit from death he didn’t know it but he was a dead man walking. Rosie was talking again. “He made me lie there naked as he told me how he had planned everything as his revenge on you and that now he had raped me the next one would be Helen. He said it was justice for the way you and her had treated him she had betrayed him and by rights should have still been going out with him and not you.” She was sobbing freely now and I held her to me as she continued. “The final humiliation was when it was over and I was lying there naked he looked at me and there was disgust written all over his face. He threw my clothes at me and said get dressed you whore and get out of the house you are contaminating it most women would have rather died than subject themselves to what you did so all I can say is that you must have loved it you slut.” The tears were now flowing like a river as she told me. “I tried to run out but as I was leaving he said to me don’t even think about reporting this or telling anyone or I will tell the police you came here and charged me money for what we did. I knew in my heart he was right and that if he branded me a prostitute he would probably get away with it after all I had gone back to his house alone and I knew that it would kill Ma.”

She sobbed her heart out my brave Rosie brought to this state by that bastard Smith I would take great pleasure in killing the little fucker and I laid her back against the pillows as she said. “That’s why I was so worried about you two a hate like that in a lad of his age is not normal and he will try to get back at you and Helen anyway he can. You must always be careful Billy Boy like I say he is a smooth talking devil and he is very clever.” She squeezed my hand saying. “Please warn Helen for me will you for he hates her maybe even more than he hates you. So try not to hit him again or do anything else foolish because he will have set a trap for you just as he did for me. You must promise me love you must swear on Helen’s life and I will rest easy?” I replied assuring her that I would be on my guard at all times but I reminded her that he was not in my Battalion and it would be unlikely that our paths would cross. But underneath I knew that they would and that I would kill him not just for what he had done to Rosie although that made me feel sick but because of the threat he posed to Helen. Rosie was really tired now the length of time she had been talking had really taken it out of her so I said. “I will leave you now love to rest but always remember this you have and always will be my sister and I couldn’t wish for a better one.” She smiled and I smiled back

before I continued saying. "I will try to get some more leaves as soon as is reasonably possible so that I can come back and see you CSM Domby will fix it for me I'm sure." Rosie replied. "Yes he has been a good friend and a tower of strength when he was home last he made all the arrangements for when the time comes." I tried to shush her but she went on. "There is no trying to hide the fact for everyone knows that I'm dying and it's good to know that at least I don't have to worry about the funeral arrangements he really has been a rock." I was startled for I never knew that he had done all this but then again that was typical of the man he just got on and did things. I'm sure he saw no reason to tell anyone what he had done for he didn't look for praise or recognition and the respect that I had for him before was even higher now.

Rosie said. "Please forgive me Billy Boy for what's happened?" I replied. "Forgive you for what there is nothing to forgive it was not your fault that the twisted bastard raped you. It was his believe you me he wanted to get back at me and he knew we were close and so he took it out on you and for that I must apologise." I held her and gave her one last hug saying. "Don't you ever blame yourself for what happened there is only one bastard to blame, and I will see you the next time I'm on leave now you must get some rest." I kissed her forehead and started to leave the room but she stopped me and said. "I love you Billy Boy always remember that, goodbye and look after yourself and don't forget to tell Helen." I looked at her and there was sadness in her eyes and I knew that I would never see my beloved Rosie again I left the room my mind in turmoil as Beth stepped in and walked past me. I went back down stairs and my mood was a bad one to say the least Helen saw my face and wasted no time in dragging me into the front parlour and asking. "What is it love has Rosie taken a turn for the worst I had better go to her?" I replied. "Please wait Helen I have something that I need to tell you and it must be now." She turned back to me and I guided her to the table and pulled out two stand chairs for us we sat together with our knees touching and then I took both her hands in mine and I said. "Rosie has just given me a warning for both of us and I promised her that I would tell you." So I went on to tell Helen what had occurred I spared her nothing telling her about the rape and the planning that had gone into it. As I finished she was visibly shaking and she swore saying. "That bastard Tommy Smith I will kill him myself if I ever see him but what about poor Rosie I had better go and see her before we go to the station."

I squeezed her hands as I replied. "Wait a moment Rosie's right love we must keep a weather eye out for friend Smith because hate seems to have warped his mind?" Helen released one of her hands and held it to her mouth as she said. "I can't believe that someone could hate us so much at our age and after all I only stepped out with him a couple of times he meant nothing to me." I looked at the love of my life and the compassion I felt for her knew no bounds as I replied. "He obviously though there was more to it than that and it just unhinged the little bastard when we took up together." I could see tears in Helen's eyes as she said to me. "I know all that but I'm mortified that he would plan and rape Rosie because of me I just can't grasp such evil." Her face was crumpled with grief as I replied. "I know my love but I don't think that was the only reason he did it Smith is one of the evil bastards that you sometimes meet in life. But don't worry I will pay him back for what he has done believe you me he will reap what he has sown and it won't be long neither." Helen then said. "I must go now and see Rosie before we go to the station and you had better get your kit together as we will be leaving shortly", and she stood up leaving me there as she went off to go upstairs. I left the front parlour and went to get my kit as I was walking down the hallway Bert came out of the kitchen and greeted me saying. "I have just been to see Rosie with Mabel e have said our goodbyes I do hope she recovers as she is such a trooper." I nodded my acknowledgment as I replied. "Listen Bert I'm just going to get my kit and then I will come back down with it alright we will have a smoke and by that time the girls should be ready to accompany us to the station." Bert's face hung down like a bloodhound and was just as sad as he said. "I wish we didn't have to go back I can't bear to leave Mabel behind it physically hurts me when we are apart and I know it hurts her as well." I didn't like the turn this conversation was taking and so I replied. "Well we have to go back you know that I feel the same way about Helen as you do about Mabel but you know the penalty for

going AWOL on active service its death old chum and don't you forget it just think were she would be then."

We walked into the front parlour and I dropped my kit on the floor near Bert's we sat in the armchairs by the fire and lit our fags Bert said. "I didn't t mean in the hallway that I wouldn't go back it was just you know wishful thinking I wound miss this upcoming show for the world especially when all my mates are going to be in it." I replied. "I know that we all dream about not having to go back but it is not that part which gets to me it is down at the station saying farewell that's when it hits me." We sat in silence for a few minutes each contemplating the time when you would have to let the person you loved most in the world go and dreading this final parting. The girls came in just then and Helen nodded at me they both looked drawn and a tangible air of sadness hung over them Mabel looked at us and with a wistful smile said. "Come on you two heroes its time to go though god knows Helen and I don't want you to." We grabbed our kit and Beth who by now had come down to see us off kissed us both on the cheek saying. "May god protect the two of you and may you come back to all of us soon." I replied. "Give Rosie my love everyday and tell her that I hope to see her soon once this big show is over." We then went out and down the passageway opening the door and stepping out onto the path the girls took our arms and we set off for the tram stop.

There didn't seem to be that many soldiers waiting to board so I thought we are either early or late as I could only see about four at the stop waiting. We knew two of the lads stood there and shook hands then we were introduced to the other two who it turned out were from Abel Company. Then we rejoined the girls it was then that a small round man with sparse hair turned up he had bright dark button eyes like a birds seeing our uniforms and that we were closest he turned to us and said. "Well how's this offensive going then?" I turned to him and replied. "More offensive than the last time I was asked." Bert and the rest of the lads burst out laughing and even the girls were finding it hard not to giggle. The little round chap moved away with a scowl on his face but I thought serves him right because we were sick of being told or asked about the up coming 'Big Push' or 'New Offensive'. The tram came along and we boarded it further down the line and Nobby Clark got on and we all travelled together to the station although we were quite now that the tram was getting closer to town. As we travelled along more and more soldiers boarded until we nearly filled the tram the civilians who were on board whished us well and god speed as the got off at their respective stops.

When we arrived at the station a RTO was shouting. "All leave personnel returning to France please board the train on platform one immediately." We made our way to the platform and eventually managed to fight our way through the crowd of men and equipment then we saw Frank stood with his mother and a woman of about twenty or so. He started waving like a demented seagull and we made our way over to him as we got closer we saw that we had been wrong about the woman's age. Bert punched me on the arm saying. "Bloody hell have you seen who's there seeing our Frank off I can't believe it?" I replied. "I know I had to look twice it really beggar's belief." We said these things because the woman standing with Frank and his mother was none other than Ivy Tillman from the Intack Inn. We walked up to them and Frank introduced us his mother took my hand and squeezed it saying. "Thank you lad for being with my boys when they both needed it", and she stepped back. I blushed but I was really grateful to Mrs Lord for her kind words then Frank introduced us to Ivy who we all knew anyway. It was worth it though just to see Nobby Clark's jaw hit the deck if it had gotten any wider the train might have mistook it for a tunnel. Ivy smiled at me and said. "Hello Billy Boy how are you doing?" Helen took hold of my arm again very possessively just to show the little madam that it was her seeing me off and not Ivy. Once again the RTO and Military Police were trying to cajole and shove the leave men onto the train. We broke up then to say our individual farewells to our girls Helen and I held each other tight and we kissed softly then our lips parted and Helen said. "I don't want you to go love I don't think that I could live if anything

happened to you.” I had never seen a more beautiful sight than my love standing there with her long back hair being blown by the wind and her Madonna’s face streaked by tears.

Then the train whistle blew and the harassed looking RTO and the MPs were now running up and down the platform chivvying everyone along and threatening the direst consequences for those who did not get on the train. Helen looked into my eyes and asked. “Your not sorry about what we have done are you?” I had a quizzical look on my face thinking that she meant us living like husband and wife as I replied. “What do you mean I don’t understand?” She shook her head saying. “You are not sorry about the engagement it isn’t worrying you is it?” I quickly said. “Certainly not you are the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I can’t wait to have you as my wife.” I kissed her and she smiled saying. “Good because I’m not sorry about anything that’s happened neither am I ashamed of what we have done and I cant wait for you to be my husband. The last train whistle blew and I kissed Helen again for the last time and she clung to me as the tears ran down her cheeks and they wet and mixed with mine. I had to prise her off and she and Mabel clung to each other like survivors on a life raft the parting almost too much to bear for all of us. We got into a carriage that Nobby had reserved by putting our kit on the seats and everyone was waving I saw Helen mouth. “Watch out for that Tommy Smith remember what Rosie said love.” Bert looked at me saying. “What’s she on about a shit like Tommy Smith for has something happened?” I told him about the other night when I punched him just to throw Bert off the scent he then patted me on the back saying no one deserved a thrashing more. Helen shouted again but I could still only read her lips because of the noise. “Come back my love I can’t live without you please even if your injured as long as were together come back.” I will never forget the sight of her standing there with the tears cascading down her face and her heart fit to break calling out to me in near hysteria. The train jerked stopped and jerked again and then we were moving all the soldiers hanging out of the windows there loved ones on the platform waving and blowing kisses. As we started to move faster I blew kisses to Helen and she to me, Mabel was waving and blowing kisses to Bert and Ivy was doing the same with Frank and I saw his mother who was waving like a broken semaphore. We left them behind as the train picked up speed transporting us back to the horror of the trenches and the war.

Chapter Sixteen

We were in a siding waiting for an ammunition train to pass us on its way to the front we were once again being transported in the lice infested wagons of the French railway system. Sat in the open doorway of the wagon we were kicking out feet bored with the incessant delays that we had been subjected to. We started chatting to pass the time and Bert said. “Well Frank how long have you and Ivy been walking out?” Frank looked at him to see if he was taking the piss before he replied. “Only a couple of days really but we spent those days together and never left each others company and that was enough for me to know that she is the girl for me.” He looked to see if anyone was laughing at him but there was only me and Bert listening as he continued saying. “I know that I can speak to you two because you are my best mates and in the same boat as me with your lasses and that.” He looked out into the French night and his eyes took on a long distance look as he went on with his story. “It was the night that we were all together in the Intack after she had come over and sat with us when we were leaving she asked me if I was married?” He smiled at the remembrance of this then said. “Of course I said no then she says well are you walking out with anyone and again I tell her no. So then she says to me neither is she and isn’t it fate and a good thing that we met?” Frank laughed and continued. “I don’t know if it was the same for you two but I had this really strong feeling that she was the right one for me its hard to explain but I just knew that she was the one for me and that she felt exactly the same about me.” I said. “Well good for you Frank and I hope that you will both be happy together forever.” Bert joined in saying. “I know exactly what you mean it was just the same for me and my Mabel.” He replied. “Thanks lads I knew if anyone would

understand it would be you two”, we shrank back into the doorway as the ammo train thundered past. It was then I told him about me and Helen getting engaged he thumped me on the back and said. “Congratulations and well done I’m so happy for the both of you I really am”, and we all sat back with smiles on our faces as we thought about our loved ones.

Eventually we boarded Lorries and were transported close to the front we the disembarked and started our march to ‘Dead Man’s Farm’. We arrived as dawn was beginning to break and the amount of men and supplies that had been stored here and in the surrounding countryside since we left was staggering. Almost every field, wood and broken down village and farm held either supplies or troops. We made for our barn just as the lads were stirring and as we got up to the doors there was a lot of horseplay and questions being shouted. People wanted to know how our leave had gone and more important what home comforts had we brought back with us from ‘Blighty’. George saw us and ran over throwing his arms round us and saying. “How are you fettling lads I can see just how glad you are to be back, have you seen the amount of equipment that’s been stored round here then you will be able to guess the fatigues and working parties that we have been allocated?” Frank replied. “We can guess because we have been passing supply columns all night on there way here so something must be going on.” George looked at us shaking his head as he said. “Haven’t you heard about the offensive that’s being planned it’s supposed to be huge.” We all broke out laughing and George looked at us as though we were deranged then Bert said. “Yes we’ve heard that the ‘Big Push’ is getting pushier and the ‘Offensive’ is getting more offensive”, and again we all broke into laughter. I explained saying. “You know when you were at home and you came back saying that people were talking about a ‘Big Push’ well now everyone and their monkey knows about it. In fact they know more than you me and the General Staff and if you can be bothered to listen they will even tell you the date of the attack.” Just before breakfast I took George to one side and told him about me and Helen getting engaged his face broke into a huge grin and he hugged me to him saying. “It couldn’t have happened to two nicer people you were made for each other and I couldn’t be more chuffed I’m over the moon for the pair of you.” After we had finished breakfast S/Sgt Ted Wallace came up to me and said. “The CSM wants to see you Billy Boy he’s in the out building at the bottom of the yard that is now Company HQ.” I doubled over to the HQ and as I neared the building I saw the CSM sat outside on a chair so I walked up to him and said. “I believe you wanted to see me Sir?” He replied. “Pull up that ammo crate and sit down lad I just want a word with you”, so I pulled the crate over and sat down. He continued. “How was Rosie when you left had there been any change in her condition?” I replied. “Sorry I have to be the one to tell you Sir but Rosie has very little time left she is getting worse by the day”, my head sank down and I looked at the floor. He said. “I’m awfully fond of her and I’m so sorry to hear the bad news but I’ve taken care of her affairs and her last bequests.” I told him. “Yes I know she spoke of it when we talked on my last day she thinks a lot of you and I’m glad that you sorted everything out for her.”

We were both silent for a minute and then he spoke again. “I don’t know if we will be able to get any leave if anything happens until after this offensive that’s being planned. I replied. “She might be alright for awhile Sir or that’s at least what I’m hoping and praying for that she hangs on until we can get back to her.” Once again we lapsed into silence then the CSM said. “How are Helen, Mabel and Beth are they managing to keep their spirits up?” I replied. “They are not bad considering what they have been through but things are hard for them.” He shook his head and said. “Yes of course they will be still we must give them what support we can when we can and just hope for the best.” I asked him. “Is that it Sir I must go and get my kit sorted and make sure I have everything I need.” He replied. “Right lad get off with you, and just remember if you ever need me you know where I am”, we shook hands and I set off for the barn. I turned back and the CSM looked at me asking. “Is there something else I can do for you lad?” I replied saying. “I just wanted to tell you Sir that Helen and I have gotten engaged when I was on leave seeing as you are family.” He said. “Thank you son that is the best news that I’ve heard in a long while I congratulate you both and hope that you will be very happy and thank you for thinking of me as family”, we shook hands again and then I went off to check my kit. Two days later we headed back into the line we started the march after dinner and it

was hard going making our way forward as we moved up a convoy of ambulances went past us and we stood back off the road to let them pass. We could see the white squares with red crosses painted on their canvas sides as the Crossley tenders bumped past us on their rubber tyres. In the fields at the roadside Artillery Batteries were stationed everything from howitzers to field guns and then of course there was the ever present cavalry detachments. These had taken over most of the woods behind the front line and they had established their horse lines here. There were also supply dumps springing up all over the place packed to bursting with all the things we would need for the forthcoming offensive.

As we marched along we could hear the dull thunder of the guns sounding from the front and then every now and again a bigger thud as the larger calibre guns took over. Then as we got nearer there was chaos in fact it was utter pandemonium with troops standing waiting to be taken forward. The Military Police with their blanketed webbing and clean uniforms and their pistols in holsters attached to their webbing belts were trying to sort out the mess of people. Lorries, wagons and mule trains that were all now entangled as we got closer to the front line. A group of walking wounded passed us and we noticed the fresh blood on their bandages and the fish belly white of their skin. As they passed us on their way to the ambulances they neither saw or recognised us their stares off in the distance in some remembered hell They moved like sleepwalkers and their uniforms were torn and tattered loose puttees flapped threatening to trip their wearers up some of the wounded muttered to themselves as they walked along others were silent lost in a world of pain they took no interest in us only in where they were going. We turned down a sunken road and on into the beginning of a communications trench as we walked along we would sometimes stumble over shoring planks or broken duckboards. Sometimes the trench would be so shallow that you had to bend double to continue along it and in these places you would often see notices warning 'Beware Sniper'!!! We followed the course of the communications trench which twisted and turned as it followed the landscape along. As we walked through them every so often we would pass under plank bridges that spanned the trench we would also have to turn right angle corners where the blast walls were. These also served to stop the enemy charging along the trench in sufficient numbers to be able to capture it. One man could hold these positions against large numbers of the enemy as they could only navigate these places one at a time making it impossible for them to have any kind of numerical advantage.

We kept on moving along these narrow trenches which now had sandbags on top of the parapet and we could see that grass had seeded itself between these and was now growing adding a splash of green against the muddy colour of the hessian bags. Running along the wall was D3 field telephone wires that looked like strands of wool twisting and winding themselves together as they disappeared around a bend in the trench. In some places the wire hung down and would catch on our equipment as we passed by and we would wrench ourselves loose sometimes breaking the wire as we did so. A short time later we found ourselves in the reserve trenches and these were heavenly after being in the narrow communication trenches. They were wider for a start and better fortified they had willow branches woven into the trench walls and timber props to shore up the trench walls. Moving along them we saw dugouts with corrugated tin roofs cut into the trench sides and inside some of them we could see furniture that had been liberated from damaged dwellings. Some of these dugouts had humorous signs on them saying no Hawkers or no Gypsies. Or Salesmen Tramps and so on. As we moved along a heavy rain started and this had a depressing effect on us not only were we getting coated in mud now but rain was running down our necks. I could see that some of the lads had a martyr's expression on their faces others walked along with backs bent like old men and still the rain lashed down. As we arrived at the connecting trenches that would convey us into the front line trenches we had to hug the walls as men who had been relieved stumbled past us in their haste to get to the reserve trenches where they could rest for a while. We seemed to be stuck in the same position for ages and a cold wind blew in gusts round the corner of the trench and it whistled screeching through the gaps in the sandbags on the parapet.

We finally moved into the front line trench taking over from a Battalion of the York & Lancaster Regiment who were a Pals unit like us. As I looked up at the parapet I could see rusty

barbed wire strung out across the top and the usual smell of latrines, chloride of lime, sweat and decomposing bodies assaulted our sense of smell. The York & Lanc's boys were glad to be going back to the reserve trenches and the small amount of comfort they offered. Generally the duration of our stay in the front line was four days with a further four days served in the reserve trenches. This however could vary enormously depending on what units could be used for relief and how the situation at any given time was going sometimes relief units were rushed to other places to hold the line. If this happened it could be a week two weeks or even longer that you would have to spend in the line and this threw all the relief plans out of joint. We settled back into our life in the front line like the veterans we now were as we waited for our watch to start Frank, Bert, George and me sat on the fire step when George suddenly said. "Here have you seen the size of the rats around here they are bigger than bloody house cats", he threw a stone in the mud and it sank immediately. He continued saying. "I swear one this morning was stalking me and as soon as the chance came, it ran down the trench wall nicked the last bit of bacon off the tip of my bayonet and scarpered with it". Frank replied. "Your right George they are getting perishing cheeky mind you it's all the stiffs and empty bully cans and other shit lying around", and we all nodded our agreement. Bert joined in saying. "The morning hate was a bit rough first thing I heard a couple of lads from Able Company bought it." George asked. "Did you know them then?" He replied. "No I didn't recognise the names so I don't think it's anyone that we know" and Bert started to scrape the mud off his trousers with his bayonet.

We sat and thought about the lads that had been killed when George said again. "I heard that there were casualties amongst the York & Lanc's in the reserve trench it was hit by a 'Flying Pig' (a trench mortar) nasty bloody things they are." I was about to agree with him when a voice we knew well shouted. "What the hell are you lot doing maybe you think you're on holiday or something?" We looked up to see RSM Greaves bearing down on us with the newly promoted Sgt Kenny beside him the RSM turned to him saying. "Find these shirkers something to do Sgt Kenny we cant have them lounging around the trench like a lot of Parisian whores." We all stood up wondering what torture we would have to endure until our turn for watch came up. Then I heard. "Not you young Lamb you come along with me", and the RSM turned and walked down the trench so I followed like a lost puppy. I was mortified as I trotted along and the cheeks of my arse were flapping from the farting I was doing because I was shitting myself. As we moved along the trench I said. "Have I done something wrong then Sir?" But no answer came from the RSM he just kept on steaming ahead tramping his way along the duck boards oblivious to everything else. Eventually we came to a small sap where a sniper plate had been erected this was a steel plate with eye holes cut into it and a rifle slot. S/Sgt Aaron Cocker was stood there as we arrived and he greeted me by saying. "Well, well if it isn't our very own sharpshooter Pte Lamb W, step right up here and be amazed?" The RSM said. "I will leave him in your hands Staff make sure he knows what's what mind you most of this lot couldn't find their arses with their own hands", and after leaving this little pleasantry he waltzed off.

S/Sgt Cocker turned to me saying. "Right lad pin your ears back and listen to what I have to say and it just might save your miserable life", he smiled at me and stroked his moustache. He continued. "We are a bit short on the marksman front and you being one well we thought what's the point of you doing fatigew's when we can use your talent right here." He tapped the man who was watching through the plate on the back and he stepped down. I now saw that it was Fred Talbot from the 3rd Platoon and he said. "Wotcher Billy Boy how goes it with you then?" I replied. "In the pink as always Fred and so are the rest of the lads thanks for asking, but how about you how did you get put on this thing?" A voice growled. "Shut the fuck up do you think this is a bloody woman's knitting circle or something?" It was S/Sgt Cocker and he continued saying. "Your supposed to be hard bitten killers who are hunting Hun snipers not ladies taking afternoon tea", and he looked at us disgustedly. Then he said to me. "Come on now Lamb get up behind the shield and tell me what you see." I climbed up and looked out scanning the churned up shell cratered ground in front of me I thought to myself that there are hundreds of places that a sniper might conceal himself. I knew it would be difficult but I also knew that once I got into my stride I had no doubt that I could spot him. S/Sgt

Cocker moved up beside me saying. "Well have you spotted anyone yet or are too busy playing with your twizell and thinking about the little girl back home to do your job?" I was quite upset by his attitude and snapped. "I have looked over the terrain and it is very good sniping territory and there are hundreds of places where you could go to ground and snipe from", my voice trailed off. He said to me. "You don't say, no really get away with you I would never have known how good the ground was if you hadn't told me", and his sarcasm bit into me like a rabid dog.

He smoothed his moustache with his finger as he continued saying. "So I take it you didn't see the chap out by the old artillery limber that's a shame because you are dead then?" I looked through the eye holes again to where he had said and quartered the ground but I saw nothing. I was just about to turn round and tell him that he needed glasses when the barest movement caught my eye. I looked again and this time I saw him he had covered himself with mud and bits of debris it was a brilliant piece of camouflage and if he hadn't moved his rifle I would never have spotted him. I turned to S/Sgt Cocker and said. "I have spotted him he's just beside the broken wheel of the limber I had trouble at first but he moved his rifle slightly and that caught my eye." He replied. "Yes he did the same with me and that little movement is going to cost him dearly now just you watch how an old hand takes care of Hun bastards like him." I stood down from behind the sniper plate thinking that he would take up his rifle and deal with the sniper. He said. "Get back up here who told you to step down and leave your post now you just take note of how a master craftsman does things." Then he shouted to Fred. "Go and tell the 'Stokes Mortar' crew to put a couple of rounds onto that old French limber out to our front." Fred rushed off to tell the mortar crew and I watched through the eye holes of the plate as the 'Pumpkins' (trench mortars) dropped onto the limber throwing earth and mud up into the air and no doubt parts of the Hun sniper as well. I could not imagine that there was much of him left after the rounds dropped on him maybe an arm or a few fingers or toes some scattered teeth no not a lot at all. Aaron Cocker said to me. "These German snipers are very good they are specially trained for the job so you don't take chances with them. If you spot one call down a couple of trench mortar rounds onto him don't bother about having a duel with him do it my way and you might just survive."

I once more looked through the shield at the crater that now marked the spot where the sniper had gone to ground and I thought that Aaron was right this was the best way to do it although it rankled with me that I couldn't take them on just to show I was as good as they were. He continued saying. "The thing is lad if you miss your shot he then has a clear go at you and believe you me he will not miss now with the mortar rounds there is very little chance of missing and even if they do your position is not compromised. If you keep that in mind you wont go far wrong take it from me", I did because I knew now that I must think of Helen and keep myself as safe as I could. He took Fred off duty shortly after and I was left to watch for snipers or anyone else to kill preferably an Officer. So I spent the rest of the watch at the plate watching but I didn't see anymore snipers or even anyone to shoot so it was rather boring but that was what it was like most of the time. But I was to spend many hours in the future looking through sniper plates sometimes successfully and sometimes not but always playing the cat and mouse game of hunt the sniper. We moved to the reserve trenches having completed our stint in the line it was alright in these trenches although we could never completely relax it was a lot better than being in the front line. It was March now and it still continued to rain heavily we were sat in a dugout which was reasonably cosy because someone had nicked a brazier from somewhere and we had bunk beds made out of chicken wire and wood it was sheer luxury.

George was complaining as usual he asked. "Has anyone any clean dry socks before I end up with trench foot I'm beginning to resemble a bloody duck here?" Everybody laughed at him as Bert shouted. "Would Sir not like some clean underwear as well or maybe I could take our Sir's suit for cleaning." George scowled at this but really he should have had more sense as we were all in the same boat and all in danger of contracting trench foot if not something worse. I must admit though that the sanitation and hygiene facilities in the trenches were practically non existent. It was hard to

wash and shave and with the mud it was impossible to keep clean because we were caked stiff in the stuff. That was bad enough but then you had to put up with the lice rats and other vermin that infested the trenches the conditions really were terrible. There was no paper for the latrine so you ended up wiping your ass with either your hand or with grass if there was any. But the best source of toilet paper was the letters from home and many an epistle as long as it was only talking of trivialities had gone south down the hole. This had given the recipient though a luxurious wipe for his ass which also saved a lot of trouble from his piles in the long run. I'm sure that he would thank you from the bottom of his heart or from his bottom itself dear sender but I doubt if you could understand. Five days later we left the reserve trenches and made our way back to 'Dead Man's Farm' where we received more fatigues and working parties. As we trudged along with the rain slanting down everyone noticed that if anything the build up for the new offensive had gotten even bigger with more supplies and men if that was possible. We could see that there was far more troops, guns, cavalry, wagons and Lorries moving up than we had ever seen before. We reached the farmstead and saw that now there were even troops and stores dumps in the fields and orchards of the farm and they stretched right down to the river and on the far side of it was a cavalry troop in lager.

Arriving back at our barn we entered and dropped our kit I sat down and wrote a letter to Helen telling her how much I missed her and how I couldn't wait to get back to her I noticed that Bert and Frank were doing the same thing and we passed a quite half hour like this. George interrupted us by shouting. "Breakfast's ready come on or there will be nothing left for us." After breakfast we were ferried back to the delousing centre and picked up new uniforms which we desperately needed then it was back to the farm for the fatigues and working parties. So we started our lives as slaves chivvied along by the NCOs at every turn and hardly having time to take a breath. A few days later Bert and I were picked for a working party to go up and mend a communications trench that had been blown in by an 'Oil Can' (large trench mortar shell). As we stood in line waiting to go a couple of the new replacements had the wind up something fierce they were sweating and trembling. I said. "What's wrong with you all you have to do is take it easy and everything will be alright there's nothing to it." He turned to me stuttering. "It's alright for you your numbers not thirteen" and I watched as a violent tremor shook his body. I replied. "Is that all that's wrong I will take your number it doesn't bother me", and Bert and I changed places with him and his mate. He turned to us and said. "Thanks a lot mate you don't know how much it means to me to get rid of that number", I shrugged as him and his mate grinned from ear to ear. We numbered off and started our journey to the trench we had to mend and when we got there we set to it was hard going but we had now got most of the walls shored back up and the trench cleared so we were not far off finishing. The Sgt who was in charge said. "Numbers ten and eleven come here?" Bert made to move but I restrained him saying. "Its not us Bert remember we changed places with those new lads." The Sgt turned as the two new lads approached and he said to them. "Right you pair I want you to go to the stores and pick up our rum ration I think we deserve it after putting things to rights here", and he gave them a chit for the rum. They took the chit and set off laughing and joking on their way to the stores and they had only just got round the blast wall and couldn't have been far down the next trench when we heard a scream and a roar overhead.

We ducked down as a large explosion and a plume of black smoke rose up into the air and a 'Jack Johnson' (trench mortar shell) landed on the part of the trench that they had just reached. We stood up and rushed past the blast wall into the other part of the trench all that was left of the two new lads was a red hot smouldering hole with a few bits of flesh and splashes of blood scattered around. We filled the hole in but as we did Bert and I were in a blue funk shaking and I could have sworn that I had filled my trousers as Bert stuttered. "If we hadn't changed places that would have been all that was left of us there now." I replied. "I know but that's hard luck on them and bloody good luck for us unless you would rather be in their place?" There were not enough of them left to bury so they have no grave we just shovelled the bits of flesh into the hole with the rest of the debris and covered it the blood was washed away by the rain. But they were in good company as there were

stiffs from the earlier fighting including some French buried in most of the trench walls and floors. We got back to the barn and everyone agreed that we had received the devils own luck and they congratulated us on our good fortune. Frank put a damper on the whole thing though when he said. "Mind you don't use up to much of your luck now or you might not get any when you really need it later." I thought to myself thank you very much 'Cheerful Charlie' you would brighten up any party with your hilarious and positive comments.

It was now close to the end of April and we were due to go back into the front line this time for a protracted stay as we moved up I noticed for the first time some old graves off to our left on the corner of a woods. They looked forlorn in the late evening light with the mouldy forage caps hung on the crosses and I wondered how long they had been there and if anyone else had noticed them. We went back to the same trench system and once again moved into the trench system relieving the Battalion that was manning them who made their way into the reserve trenches. Nobby Clarke piped up singing. "Here we all are happy as can be all good friends and jolly good company." Sgt Kenny yelled at him. "Shut up you fucking idiot where do you think you are on the pier at Blackpool or what?" Things had started to get a bit tense as the build up for the 'Big Push' was still going on at quite a pace making tempers a bit frayed. We had been in the line for a couple of days when S/Sgt Ted Wallace came round to get me he said that our new Lieutenant wanted a meeting and so I followed him to the dugout. There was my old friend John Pearson who had come from the 2nd Battalion and was now in charge of our platoon. As I arrived and saluted him he returned it and then said. "Its good to see that you are still alive Pte Lamb, now then we have a bit of a raid planned for tonight but I will let the S/Sgt brief you and I will see you later on", we saluted and he went off to do whatever he had to. Ted Wallace offered me a woodbine which I lit as I asked. "What's going on did he just say we had a raid on tonight or was I hearing things?" He replied. "Listen Billy Boy some bum boy on the Staff has come up with the bright idea that they need a sample of the German wire don't ask me why", and he spat in disgust. Then he continued saying. "So yours truly and one more silly sod have been volunteered to go out and get some and I thought I'm not going out there without a bloody good shot with me hence why you volunteered."

I looked at him as if he were mad knowing that he had volunteered me because I certainly hadn't and I said. "Well thanks' a lot Ted and I really thought you were a mate just shows you how wrong you can be." He replied. "I am a mate lad and that's why your coming along do you really think that I'm going to crawl towards the German wire with no one supporting me there's not a chance." He looked at me pointedly and I knew why he had chose me but I was livid with him he then told me that he would come and get me later on and we would go and get the Staff bastards wire for him and get safely back. I left him and went back and told the lads what was going on and they were as disgusted by the whole thing as I was. Gorge asked. "What the bloody hell do they want German wire for is there something special about it?" Frank replied. "Yes there is something different about it I was talking to a bloke from the Engineers who told me it is thicker and has a different make up to ours so obviously someone on the Staff wants to check it out before the offensive starts." I sighed and said. "Frank's probably right the Brass just want a sample before the main attack then they and the artillery will know what they are up against. Just as we finished Ted Wallace came up and said. "Are you ready for the off lad we will be starting in a short while when it gets really dark." The sky was already darkening fast as I replied. "Well we are going but whether I'm ready is another thing but I suppose we better be on our way." Ted smiled at me as he said. "Look I know how you feel and I wish there was something that we could do but we will just have to grit our teeth and hope for the best." Frank who had been listening to us joined in saying. "Not necessarily I think I know how you can do this without hardly any danger to yourselves." Ted Wallace laughed as he said. "Well come on then brainy tell us just how we are going to do this without reaching the front line German wire?" Frank replied. "Listen to what I'm saying out front just off to our right is a big shell hole and beside that is an old abandoned blasted cottage have you seen it?" I said. "Of course we have but what difference does that make everyone knows of it and it's

just a ruin.” Ted Wallace joined in saying. “Billy Boy is right in what he says so come on lets get this thing over with I thought he knew what he was talking about but it is all just wind and piss.”

As we turned to go Frank shouted. “Wait a minute and just hear me out the last time the Huns attacked they used the old cottage as a strongpoint and they fortified it but then they got pushed back to their present positions and guess what’s left around the old place?” Ted smacked his forehead saying. “Your right there is German wire over there I’ve seen it before but how do we know it is the stuff that we are supposed to get this new stuff?” Frank replied. “They attacked about a month ago and that Engineer told me that the Germans have had this new wire about three months and that they only use this stuff now.” Ted Wallace said. “Right then Billy Boy all we have to do is crawl out to the old cottage with the wire cutters cut a few pieces wait for a bit and then make our way back.” Frank smiled saying. “Now your talking no one will be any the wiser they will think that you got it from the front line wire and you won’t have to face the danger of that.” Shortly after me and Ted received another briefing from Lieutenant Pearson as he said to us. “You know what the Staff want so get in and get out as quick as you can but what ever happens we must get a piece of that wire.” Ted Wallace replied. “You can rely on me and Lamb Sir we will bring you the German wire back and that’s a promise.” We went over the top and led down on the parapet and then we crawled towards what was the former German strongpoint in the old cottage ruins. I had my rifle and Ted had a pistol and a couple of Mills bombs as we pushed forward he whispered in my ear. “That strongpoint seems a good place for a Hun sniper to be hiding out in so we had better be bloody careful no point in getting a bullet through the napper for nothing.” I replied. “There is no way any decent sniper would hide there its too obvious and would just be asking to be stonked by a mortar. We reached the ruins of the cottage and sat down by a broken down wall and there right in front of us was what was left of a German wire tangle. We sat dead still and waited for about twenty minutes. Ted had a flask in which he had poured some rum we had a few drinks then waited a while longer. When we knew we had been out there long enough we cut some pieces of wire and then hightailed it back to our lines dropping back into our trench and then sitting down as the tension left our bodies and cigarettes were shoved into our mouths and lit.

Captain Melstone and Lieutenant Pearson came along the trench and sought us out when they knew that we were back and Ted handed over the pieces of wire that we had cut. Captain Melstone said. “Well done lads did you encounter any trouble at all?” Ted replied. “Well Sir it was a little hairy at times but we knew how much the wire was needed so we kept our nerve and cut some from their entanglement.” Then Lt Pearson asked. “Did you get close enough to hear anything of what they were saying?” I replied we could hear them Sir but they were speaking German so I have no idea what they were saying.” Ted agreed with me as he added. “Me either Sir for all I know they could have been talking blinking Chinese for all I understood it.” Lt Pearson said. “Of course what am I thinking of its just a pity that none of you spoke German lads we might have picked something interesting up.” We apologised again for our lack of languages but Captain Melstone said to us. “That doesn’t matter go and get some sleep your excused duties for the rest of the night and just let me say well done once again”, and they went off happy with their bits of wire. I went back to the small bunker we used to sleep in when we were off duty and got on the bottom bunk allowing all the tension and stiffness to leave my body. The blanket used to cover the opening was pushed aside as Bert and Frank came in drawing it closed behind them and lighting a couple of stubs of candle. There was a scurrying along the floor as the cockroaches and rats ran for cover but not before Bert stamped on a few roaches with his boot. Frank asked. “How did it go then did what I told you work?” I replied through my tiredness. “Yes it worked a treat we got up to the old cottage and there was a load of wire about well at least plenty for what we wanted. We clipped a few pieces and then waited for a bit before we brought them back.” Frank looked at me in the dim candlelight and smiled saying. “I’m glad it worked after all there was no point in taking more of a risk than you had to not for the sake of a bit of barbed wire.”

We all tried to settle down and get some kip before we were awakened for the morning stand to but I guess all of us were still a bit keyed up as we spent at least another hour talking. As I drifted off to sleep I dreamt that I was on the boating lake at Queens Park with Helen but this soon turned into a nightmare. Now I was stuck on the German wire while a machine gun traversed towards me I could hear it swishing its way towards me. Then the tac, tac, tac, as it got up to me, I struggled to get free from the bloody wire before I felt the bullets punch into my back but I was mesmerised as I heard pins coming from the wire where it had been hit. I managed to get one arm free before the machine gun could reach me but it was not enough and I felt the bullets tearing and burning into my flesh as I awoke with a scream covered in sweat my body trembling with fear. A few days later we were relieved again leaving the front line and spending some time in the reserve trenches then we had left to return to 'Dead Man's Farm'. It was now May and the build up for the offensive was now a monster with a momentum and purpose all of its own. With more and more artillery pieces arriving and many ammunition and supply dumps being prepared for the final attack. Not only this but of course the fatigue and working parties work load had almost trebled and we were more knackered than ever as we humped stuff up and down like bloody mules.

It was the 9th of May and I was now seventeen and to make matters even better I had received some mail from Helen and now I was reading it. She had also sent me one of those soppy cards that were being hawked about that showed a soldier thinking of his sweetheart back home and she had written happy birthday on the back of it. There was also a small box and when I opened it I found a plain gold wedding band inside I read the letter that had accompanied it and this told me that I should put it on my wedding ring finger because Helen was wearing the twin on hers. I smiled at the thought and my heart soared to think how much she really loved me. I was interrupted by Frank and George who had come into the barn and they told me they had a surprise as George said. "We are going to take you into Auchonvillers tonight for a little light R & R and to help celebrate your birthday." So that night we set off in a Crossley Tender that was on its way to pick up supplies from Auchonvillers. We dropped off in the village and went to the first estaminet that caught our eye as we entered we could see that it was full of off duty Tommie's. The mass of bodies and the smell of sweat damp wool and cigarette smoke was nearly overpowering and as it caught in the back of your throat it was enough to make you gag. Frank shouted. "Right lads I will get the first round in what's it to be beer or Vin Rouge?" George replied. "It's Billy Boys birthday so let's settle for Vin Rouge that should hit the spot nicely." Frank returned from the bar with the bottles of wine and passed them out amongst us I took a long pull from the bottle and nearly spat it out the bloody stuff tasted like vinegar but after what we had supped in Egypt I concluded that it was not bad.

We stood there for a bit talking and generally having a fine time as we told jokes and laughed a woman of about twenty two came over and spoke to us. But she was talking in French and so it didn't get that much of a response from us. Frank said. "She is probably trying to flog us something, tell her to fuck off." Before we could do this however she grabbed George's hand and began to pull him he turned his head to us saying. "I think my luck might be in here", and he grinned at us. Nobby Clarke grabbed his other arm and replied. "Be careful she might be leading you into a trap there could be two or three blokes waiting to rob you as soon as you leave here." George held back when he had heard this and he was a bit more wary as the grin left his face but the woman continued to pull him by the hand and he went with her even if it was rather reluctantly. I turned to the lads and said. "We had better follow them just in case she is trying to set George up for a going over." We trailed behind them as she crossed the estaminet and then opened a side door that led out into a small yard. As we stepped out behind them we scanned the yard for any would be attackers but it was quite and empty. The woman went over to a pile of empty boxes in one corner and both George and the rest of us followed then she stooped down. Then from one of the boxes she picked up a bundle of what looked like rags she showed this too George. Frank said. "I bloody told you she was trying to sell us something", but he shut up when a cry came from the bundle and we all realised that it was a baby. Nobby looked at George saying. "What the bloody hell have you been up to then you're a bit of a dark horse on the quite and no mistake?" Before George could say anything Bert

added. "You dirty dog when did you get time to see her and why have you kept it so quite though I can well guess."

Georges face had turned white but there was an air of indignity and disbelief in equal amounts he appealed to us saying. "Now look here lads this is none of my doing I have never seen her or the child before in my life and never mind that were would I have got the time." There was much merriment amongst us on hearing this and quite a few ribald comments which left George looking appalled. Frank said. "Come on old son you cant expect us to swallow that she chose you at random from all the soldiers in there you must know her. You know what they say there is no smoke without fire or in this case no doing the dirty deed without accepting the consequences." By this time George was nearly apoplectic and he was stuttering like broken exhaust pipe as the woman smiled and continued to show him the child. George once more turned to us his face crumpled like a wet rag and etched with pain as once more he pleaded. "I don't know anything about the child or the woman I swear to you as mates." Well we might have stayed like that forever with George denying things and the woman showing him the child If Johnny Lewis and his brother in law Owen had not come out of the side door to see what was up. These were the two blokes from the Welsh mob that we had relieved when we first went into the front line trenches and they were really good blokes. Johnny came up to us and said. "Wotcher lads having a spot of trouble here or what?" We quickly explained to Johnny what was happening he listened to us and then said something to the woman who replied in a static burst of her language gesticulating with one hand while she held the child in her other arm.

Johnny turned to us after listening to the woman and said. "It would seem that this child has been abandoned and that this woman has found it out back here she is the daughter of the estaminets owner but she herself is not married." I asked. "That's all well and good but why did she come to us and to George in particular?" He spoke to her again and I saw small spots of colour redden her cheeks and she smiled at George shyly. Johnny translated saying. "It seems she wanted to know if you could take the child to one of our aid posts to see a doctor and get checked out it would seem that the village doctor has joined up so they don't have one." We all turned and looked at the woman and the tiny bundle she held in her arms Johnny spoke to her again and then relayed what she had said to us. He said. "I have explained that our doctors would not look at the child and that she must take it to the convent at Querrieu. She also told me that she picked your friend because he has a kind face and she knew that she could trust him." George smiled at her when he heard what she had said and Johnny continued saying. "She wants' me to tell him that her name is Madeline and that she is twenty one and single I think that she is quite enamoured by George and judging by his face I would say the feeling is mutual." At this point George crowed. "Well it looks like the old George Drew charm has struck again it really is the case that women can't resist me." Bert quickly brought him back to earth with a bump when he said. "She must be a bit simple in the head or something either that or she has something wrong with her eyes, Johnny ask her if she is blind?" Gorge was livid at what Bert had just said and replied. "Just a moment are you saying there is something wrong with any girl who fancies me because if you are you would have to include Mabel Smith in that statement?"

This was all getting a bit too much and Bert squared up to him saying. "Don't talk daft Mabel didn't like you at all it was all in your head man she couldn't bear to be with you so keep quite." George replied. "All in my head was it didn't seem that way when we used to kiss under the stairs she seemed to enjoy my attentions well enough then." Bert moved forward very fast and landed a solid punch on George's nose bloodying it and knocking him to the ground. The rest of us moved in quickly to put a barrier between them but by this time the woman had given the child to Johnny Lewis and was cradling George in her arms and tending to him. She held a small hanky to his nose and was now crooning to him in French as though he were a child he looked up at Bet with the utmost hurt written on his face. Well this had really put the kybosh on my birthday and no mistake just as we were beginning to get into the swing of things. Bet walked straight past the prostrate

George without saying a word and we all followed him back in to the estaminet Frank stopped and looked down at George as he lay sprawled on the ground and said. "You're a bloody fool George Drew I really do believe that your brain is addled", and he shook his head moving on. I halted beside him and he looked up at me appealingly so I simply told him. "Don't say a word George I thought you were one of my best friends but the way you have behaved has disgusted me and if you had said the same thing about Helen I would have punched you myself." He replied to this by saying. Wait a minute Billy Boy I'm sorry I said what I did its just that his words stung me you must believe me when I say that I didn't mean what came out. I said to him. "Then you are a bigger clown than what I thought and you should apologise to Bert", and with these final words I left him on the floor with his new French friend and went to join the rest of the lads.

We went to a few more estaminets in the village drinking steadily but the evening had been ruined by the argument between George and Bert. So we hitched a lift back to 'Dead Man's Farm' but when we got there we could find no sign of George either in the barn or around the farmstead. I said to the lads. "I thought that Gorge might have been back here by now seeing as he didn't join us in any of the other estaminets." Bert replied. "Bugger him I don't care if I see him again or not" and he left us going to his bed. Frank shrugged his shoulders but he said to me. "We had better get those two talking again it's not right especially with this attack coming up that friends should be falling out." I told him. "Don't worry we will get round them somehow and get them to make up because I agree with you with this offensive coming up we are going to need all the mates we can get to see us through it." The following morning George had turned up but he was more quite and subdued than usual and although me and Frank talked to him Bert refused to. We went off to breakfast but George didn't bother having any and then the fatigue and working parties started. Things might have been resolved between our friends if we had been put into the same parties but me Bert and Frank were in one lot while Gorge and Nobby were in another one. Both Frank and I tried to talk to Bert but we got nowhere it was as if George didn't exist anymore. Frank said to me. "We will leave them for a bit and let things calm down a little time apart might be just what they need at the moment. It looked like it was going to be this way because when we got back we were told that we would be moving up to relieve the line again. However George was going to be used as a runner by Battalion Headquarters and so he would be with them and not with us.

PART FIVE

THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

1st JULY 1916 - 3rd JULY 1916

Chapter Seventeen

Before we went up to the line we had a few replacements sent to us from the 2nd Battalion which was due to come over and take part in the offensive. So imagine our joy when Tommy Macey turned out to be one of them we shook his hand and welcomed him clapping him on the back. But I got the shock of my life when I was informed that the bastard who had raped Rosie was here yes that fucker Tommy Smith had been sent as a replacement and I just bloody wished that they had put him in the line with us. As it was he had been seconded to the Battalion Aid Station as a stretcher bearer, I saw him and a L/cpl called Stanley who had the most untrustworthy face that I had ever seen but I could not get near him at this time. I don't know if Smith knew that Rosie had told me what he did but he kept his distance anyway and was never alone. So I thought I would pay him a visit later on but it was too late and I never got the chance as we were ready for leaving and a few minutes later we marched off. George came to see us off and wish us luck he shook hands with us and then turned to shake Bert's hand but he refused and so George walked away shaking his head. We made our way up to the front line again and I was still stunned about Smith being here but as we marched on it seemed like it had only been a couple of days since we had left the front line trenches. The weather was quite good and we could see all the stuff that had been amassed for the forthcoming offensive. Everywhere we went there were other columns of soldiers marching along singing and every time we passed one of these columns we would cheer them and they us. We settled in the front line taking over from another Yorkshire Pals Battalion and we began the business of watching what the Hun was up to and having to stand to at first and last light. We also had to get used to the morning and evening hate again and I was sat on the fire step having a smoke with Frank just before we started our watch. When all of a sudden Sgt Kenny turned up and said. "Alright lads report to the Command Bunker and see Major Danby and Captain Thornley they have a little job for you to do." I asked him. "Is Major Danby back then when did he return I thought he was stopping with the 2nd Battalion?"

A 'Whizz-Bang' whistled past overhead and exploded in the reserve trenches Frank said. "Bloody hell their starting early today must be getting a touch testy over in the Hun lines", he threw his fag end away and began gathering his kit. Sgt Kenny looked at me saying. "It would seem that we need the Major more than the 2nd Battalion and it looks like Captain Melstone is going to made up to Major and become the Colonels right hand man. From what I hear it would seem that Capt. Thornley is going to take over as Adjutant from him so there you are then as up to date as what I am." Hearing this news I was glad for both of them but it was a shame that they would no longer be close to us as they had been really good Officers and more than that kind of friends. Sgt Kenny told us to get a move on and then went off down the trench to gather more men as Frank and I made our way to the large Command Bunker further down the trench system. When we arrived there we waited with a few more blokes and then we were ushered inside and although it was a fairly big bunker it was still

a tight squeeze. Inside there was already the Colonel Captain Melstone along with Major Danby and Captain Thornley then you had Lt Pearson CSM Domby and RSM Greaves. Colonel Terry cleared his throat and said. "The Staff wants' prisoners from the Hun's across the way so we know who we are facing and if they have any plans to change or reinforce the troops that are already here." He looked at each one of us with his good eye before he continued saying. "So to this end we are putting on a raid tonight and you men along with S/Sgt Wallace and Lt Pearson will be going on it." He then turned to Major Danby and said. "If you would be so good as to carry on with the briefing Charles."

The Major stood in front of us and said. "In about an hour's time the artillery will put a barrage on concentrating on the German wire it won't be anything big just enough to get them to send a wiring party out." He paused here to light a cigarette before he continued saying. "You lot will go out and grab preferably more than one prisoner and then leg it hot foot back here with your charges whatever happens we must have a prisoner." He paused looking at us and then said. "You will move out into the middle of 'No Man's Land' tonight and wait for them to turn up and I want no heroics. Simply remember this if we don't get a prisoner tonight then another raid will have to go out again tomorrow night or keep going out until we secure a prisoner. He blew his nose on a hanky he took from his pocket and then he returned it as he started saying to us. "Once we have our Hun's they will be sent back to the Staff HQ for interrogation the Brass really need this information as it is critical that we find out just what's happening over there. He stopped once more to let this sink in and then he said. "I know that we can rely on you to fulfil this mission that is why you have been hand picked so all that remains for me is to wish you good luck", he did this and so did the rest of the Officers. Lt Pearson stepped forward and said. "I will brief you again closer to the time of the raid informing you of what's what and what you need to know", after this Major Danby dismissed us and we left the bunker. An hour later the guns opened up with their barrage and I watched it falling on the German wire and parapet through the trench periscope. A short while later the German retaliation started and their shells plastered our front line and reserve trenches we took what cover we could in the bunkers. As the shells landed I sat in our bunker and I must have looked as scared as the rest of the lads the floor shook from the explosions and dirt fell onto our heads from the roof. It was hard to sit in the bunkers because of the fear of being buried alive by a direct hit but then the shelling stopped. After it was safe to come out Frank and I set off down the trench for the final briefing that Lt Pearson was going to give us.

As we arrived we could see that the rest of the lads were already there we were dressed in jumpers and trousers and our boots were dulled we had on balaclavas and had blackened our faces. Marksmen like me carried rifles while some of the men had pistols and bombs and a few were carrying home made coshes with which to subdue the prisoners with. Lt Pearson said. Right lads we will be going out in a few minutes when you get past our wire make your way to the centre of 'No Man's Land' and wait there for further orders. He made sure that we all understood then he continued saying. "The riflemen and bombers will cover the men who are going to grab the prisoners." He looked at his watch and then said. "Remember we want prisoners dead Hun's are no good so when we hear their wire party start to put the stakes in we will rush them. Grab as many as we can and the being covered by the riflemen and bombers we will leg it back to our lines." Had one last smoke and then it was time to climb out of the trench we led on the parapet and then crawled through our wire and on into the centre of 'No Man's Land' were we lay and waited. It was very quite and the waiting out here had everyone on pins our nerves were stretched tight and we jumped at the least little noise.

My rifle was pushed out in front of me as I covered the ground the minute's ticked by and it was like being enveloped in treacle so slow did the time go by. Then just when I thought we were going to give up because the Huns weren't going to send out a wiring party was dispelled when we heard faint noises out to our front. There was the sound of metal on metal and we could just about pick up agitated sounds of conversation and I could positively vouch for the fear that the German wire party were feeling. Then we heard the unmistakable sound of muffled hammers being used the word was passed down and we crawled forward slowly and quietly until we got into position. I was

covering Frank as he Lt Pearson and the rest of the prisoner party jumped up and set off at the run towards the wire party. Ted Wallace said to me. "Keep your eyes peeled Billy Boy and at the first sign of any trouble give the Hun's hell. I replied. "Don't you worry my rifle barrel will be red hoe I will be firing that fast because at the moment I'm seconds away from pissing in my pants and that's no joke. I could see his teeth white in his blackened face as he smiled saying. "Don't wet yourself to soon son just wait until the old Hun opens up with his 'Flying Pigs' that's the time to let your bowels go." We lapsed into silence again then we heard a voice shout. "Hilfe kammarade", coming from the wiring party. The voice was cut off probably by a home made cosh then we saw coming back our way Frank and another bloke dragging a body between them then I was pretty sure I saw some more of the lads pass us with a body held by them. But then all hell let loose as machine guns and rifles began firing and we began to give covering fire as the bombers threw their bombs. We watched as they exploded lighting up the night with flashes and the noise of them echoed in our ears. The bombers then retreated through our covering fire and legging it back to our lines following the snatch party as the whole front seemed to come to life. I will tell you something as well we were not far behind them as we made it to the safety of our trenches and we would have beaten any of the top runners in this race of death.

Just as we had got back to our trench line the fireworks display started and '5.9s' shelling us and 'Jack Johnson's' and 'Oil Can's' were thrown in for good measure. It would seem like the Germans weren't impressed with us snatching prisoners from their wiring party. The retaliation rained down on us for quite some time and it gave me the shakes because these counter strafes could be nerve shredding to say the least. I had just lit a fag when I saw Lt Pearson questioning a rather befuddled prisoner I could have almost felt sorry for him then the Lieutenant said. "There is another Hun prisoner out by our wire injured and I want him bringing in the more prisoners we have the better it will save us having to go out again." He turned to S/Sgt Wallace saying. "I want a good rifleman to go out with the stretcher bearers and give them cover while they collect the prisoner." Ted Wallace looked at me and said. "Pte Lamb you go out with the stretcher party and fetch that Hun back in." I was about to complain when I saw who was with the stretcher it was that little bastard Tommy Smith and I thought what better place to extract my revenge on the fucker but out by the wire. So I replied. "Alright Staff I will be more than happy to provide cover for the lads." Ted Wallace did a double take as he asked me. "Has a rat bit your arse or what you never agree and go quietly when I volunteer you for something?" I replied grinning. "Just doing my duty Staff you know what a good soldier I am." Ted Wallace came up to me and then grinned like a crocodile as he whispered. "I don't know what you are up to but believe me I will find out" and he walked back over to Lt Pearson.

We had to wait quite awhile till it quietened down but eventually the front lapsed into silence again and the flares stopped whooshing up as darkness returned. We crawled out through our wire and towards where the prisoner had been left Smith and the other stretcher bearer followed me. I could see the German and laid down behind a slight rise in the ground as I checked the view to my front. I knew that we had to be careful as the Germans would sometimes send out patrols to nab stretcher bearers as they picked up the wounded. The other two crawled up with their stretcher and I noticed that Smith was by my side I moved stealthily right beside him and then I whispered in his ear. "Listen to me you little fucking bastard I know what you did to Rosie and that was your first mistake your second is being out here by the wire with me because you are dead you shit", and I pulled my trench knife as I grinned like a wolf. I wish that I had listened to Rosie though and the warning she gave me for I underestimated what he would do in this situation. As I made to strike with the knife Smith started screaming like a girl having her virginity nicked and all hell broke loose once again. I was shocked and in that time as I my hand poised in midair Smith took off back to our trenches red, white and blue lights shot into the air and machine guns and rifles began to strafe the position where we lay. I heard the other stretcher bearer give a sharp scream and then a gurgle came from him as machine gun rounds slammed into his face taking most of his head with them. I could also see the body of the German prisoner jerking up and down as bullets struck him time and time

again. I was lucky the rise in the ground and the dip I was in protected me from the German fire and the prisoner's body covered me as well. As I lay there and thought I realised that Smith had screamed on purpose to get me killed and Rosie was right he was a very dangerous enemy and that I wouldn't underestimate him again if I got out of this mess. But I was determined to get back to our lines and find another way to kill the little shit so I lay as flat as I could and waited for things to quieten down again.

It took a while and I had to piss in my pants as my bladder was bursting whether because it was full or because of fear you decide. Eventually though the front went quiet again and the darkness returned it was eerie and unnerving out here and the least sound has your heart trying to crawl into your asshole. Steadily and slowly I crawled back to our lines stopping every so often to listen eventually I was close to the parapet and I gave the password before any trigger happy sentry opened fire and ignited the whole front again. The lads were so pleased to see that I was alive and had got back that you would have thought I was the prodigal son. There was no sign however of Tommy Smith and someone said that he had returned to the aid station it was now that Ted Wallace and Lt Pearson came up to me. The Lieutenant asked. "What went on out there we heard a god awful scream and then all hell let loose?" I was going to tell him it was that cowardly bastard Smith when he continued saying. "Pte Smith told us it was the wounded German prisoner who had screamed and that he had searched for you and the other stretcher bearer. He then said he had seen your bodies out beyond the wire but the Hun fire was so vicious by then that he had to come back in or he would have risked losing his own life. I looked at him thinking and you believe that bag of shite that he sold you I could not understand it but then again the first one to tell his story was believed and I had no one now to back up mine. I was tired beyond belief and had used up that much nervous energy that I was entirely drained. Ted Wallace said to me. "You were lucky lad I thought that we had lost you out there but what happened to the other stretcher bearer?" I replied. "He's dead like the German prisoner half his face and head was ripped off and it was only a corpse and a dip in the ground that stopped the same thing happening to me. Lt Pearson said. "Get yourself off to the bunker for some sleep and let me say well done on getting back here. I think though that you should thank the stretcher bearer Pte Smith for risking his neck looking for you for that took courage." I knew that I would be wasting my time if I said anything and besides which I was too tired beside as I have said Rosie was right about Smith having a silver tongue. Instead I made my way back to our bunker determined that the next time I met him silver tongue or no silver tongue I would kill him for tonight and Rosie.

Our time in the trenches on this occasion was a lengthy one and a lot of the time you spent in the trenches was boring if you were not on a working party or on stag. So to ease the pressure and too relieve the boredom we smoked and that was nearly to a man. Cigarettes comforted us in these situations and were reasonably cheap so it was no wonder so many of the lads smoked. Things were beginning to hot up now on the 'Shooting Gallery' (front line) as the Germans stepped up their artillery fire and we also had a lot of 'Flying Pigs', 'Rum Jar's' (trench mortar rounds) and 'Obus' (howitzer rounds) coming over. They made things hell and we were all for quite lives as I'm sure our German counterparts were however it was the Staff that stirred things up. We had been issued the new tin hats but they were a pain in the ass as they would fall off your head at the slightest movement. I wrote to Helen asking her if she could get me a liner that they now made in Blighty it fitted inside the helmet and looked like a bowler hat but it made sure that the helmet stayed firmly on your head and not on the floor. I signed off 'In the Pink' which was an expression everyone was using over here now and it meant alright. We had also received orders from the Staff that we should begin more offensive raids against the Huns to shake them up and keep them on their toes.

Once more our relief time came and we made our way back to 'Dead Man's Farm' as things really began to heat up. More and more extra troops were piling into the area for the forthcoming offensive and I knew that pretty soon we would be packed tighter than sardines in a can. The majority of these new troops were now Pals Battalions like ours the old army (the

comtemptables) had nearly ceased to exist and in their place the Kitchener Battalions were taking their place. Of course with this amount of activity going on we were bound to attract more attention from the German artillery and a lot of 'Coal Scuttles' (large howitzer rounds) and 5.9s were falling near to us. Now though the working parties had been extended beyond belief as ammunition food and other supplies was stockpiled ready for use. We also now got extra training on attacking trenches in formation and it got bloody annoying as attack after attack was simulated as the Officers tried to get it right.

About a week later we were again lined up with a Battalion of the York and Lancaster's and the Barnsley Pals for a simulated attack watched by Staff Officers. The trenches had been marked out with white tape and we practised moving forward in formation as smoke pots created a fog over the field. We were all pissing our selves with laughter as the Officers couldn't see what the hell was going on and so we just strolled on talking to the blokes from the other Battalions. However as we started going up the hill towards the simulated trenches the smoke cleared and we walked on over the ridge attacking the taped trenches and shooting and bayoneting nonexistent Huns. This seemed for some reason to impress the Staff Officers but I don't know why as all we did was walk past a load of white tape on the ground in line abreast. Then we received a pep talk from some decrepit Brigadier who informed us of what a smart bunch of chaps we were and that we were the pick of our town's young men. He continued saying to us that we had nothing to fear from the Huns because the artillery bombardment was going to be of a duration and ferocity never seen in a battle before. After this we would be able to walk over the German positions and just mop up the prisoners as there would be hardly any resistance we who had fought on Gallipoli had heard all this before and had suffered the casualties for it. After this he told us how proud he was to have us in his Brigade we gave him three cheers and he rode off with his entourage back to his nice comfortable HQ.

Later in the barn George said. "Who was that decrepit old fart he looked half dead and surely the army should have put him out to pasture long ago?" I replied. "I don't know but I will tell you something don't listen to this shit about the bombardment they told us all this on Gallipoli and a lot of our lads got shot to pieces because they believed it." Bert had listened to this and now said to me. "But wasn't that because you only had shrapnel shells mostly on Gallipoli were here we have loads and loads of H.E. shells (high explosive) don't forget we have carried a lot of them. Nobby Clarke butted in saying. "Billy Boys right it dint matter what you've got although I will admit that we could have used more H.E. on Gallipoli I don't trust any Staff when they start talking about artillery and how we will have a walk over." Dusty Miller now had he's say. "They talk like they do because like our esteemed commander Haig and the old fart that has just been talking to us they are all cavalry or ex-cavalry Officers. The only thing they believe in is bloody horses charging across a field and onto glory with their sabres and lances flashing in the sun." I had never before heard Dusty so bitter as he continued saying. "You listen to me it wont be those tailors dummies in the cavalry that will win this war it will be the P.B.I. (poor bloody infantry) that has to go over the top and win it."

When we weren't on fatigues or working parties I wrote to Helen every chance I got and it was only her letters that kept me going I think. I don't know how she managed it with everything she had on her plate at home but she always managed to sound cheerful and she always told me how much she loved me. I tried to keep things as light as I could in my letters keeping the blood gore and boredom out of them I also never told her how many raids I had been on because I didn't want to frighten her. Also though we had the censor to contend with this was he of the black pen who crossed things out on your letter with a stroke. It seemed like every Tom, Dick and Harry back home could write about what was going on even telling the papers but we could not get one little place name past the censor and it sickened me. We had been back in the line only a day when Frank shouted me across to the trench periscope that he was using he asked me. "What do you make of that?" I replied. "What's happening are the Huns mounting an attack?" He said. "No but they have just unfurled a big banner and are holding it up it says on it that Kitchener is dead." I was shocked

but more than this incensed as I shouted. "You dirty lying German bastards Kitcheners alive." We could now hear more comments being shouted from all along the line and now a barrage of fire opened up from one of our 'Stokes Mortars' and now a machine gun opened up shredding the banner and causing the Huns to beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the bottom of their trench.

A short time later however RSM Greaves came round and told us it was true it seemed that Kitchener had been travelling to somewhere on the naval ship H.M.S. Hampshire when it struck a mine near the Orkney Islands two days ago on the 5th of June. We were stunned and a quite descended on the trenches after all he was a father figure to all the Kitchener Battalions. After all it had been his idea and conception to call for and implement a volunteer army when things had been at there worse for our country and now he led in a watery grave. Later as we sat in the bunker George kept saying. "How could this happen how could they let him travel on a bloody ship when they know the bloody country needs him?" A voice shouted. "Shut the fuck up Gorge with your endless questions you give me the pip you really do he is dead like a lot of other people in this fucking war so just drop the thing alright?" It was Bert who said this and if we had not all stepped in there would have been another punch up as they squared up to each other. There was a lot of name calling but that was about it and eventually we managed to get them away from each other.

Well that was that and life goes on and we returned to life in the trenches at the moment the 'Shooting Gallery' was quite because the Germans were being unusually peaceful. This did not suit the Staff at all and they ordered more offensive raids again this was done with the intensions of stirring the Germans up into an attack. This would have weakened them just before our 'Big Push' got underway which if everyone was to be believed was not far off now though we would rather have had it quite as these raids could get you killed before you had even had the chance to take part in the forthcoming battle. So we along with more bombing squads up and down the line were chosen to mount a raid in two nights time all along the our section of the front. This was to let the Hun know that we were still here and that we meant business and if we could nab a prisoner or two at the same time then all the better. So we just waited for the time of the raid to come around everyone knowing just how dangerous these things could be a dangerous pastime for anyone. The day before the raid an incident happened that I really should have taken more notice of I had just been to the latrine and had come back round the corner of the blast wall. Up ahead I saw this new Battalion clerk that had joined us and who already had the reputation of a lead swinger and even worse a thief. This was L/cpl Stanley and I had heard of some of his more nefarious habits I watched as he leant against the trench wall. As I passed by he said to me. "Here you are son a genuine German watch that you can show the girls at home", he must have thought that I was one of the new lads. I replied to him. "Piss off you fucking grave robber you do know that it's a crime punishable by death to loot the dead?" His face went pale at the mention of this and so did the faces of the two lads he was talking to. I continued saying. "I'm not one of the new boys impressed by your shit I have seen more bullets flying than you have seen dodgy deals and I will tell you what on Gallipoli we would have shot you out of hand and made the world a better place."

He looked at me and I saw that he was weighing me up but he didn't like what he saw and he started stammering. "Look mate I found the watch and I was just trying to sell it to you to earn some extra money to send back to my wife and nippers", his face now had a hound dog look to it. I replied. "Shut up you lying sack of shit your not even married now get out of here and leave me alone or you will find my boot up your arse." He blustered and then shouted. "I'm a Lance Corporal and you can't talk to me like that I've a good mind to put you on a charge", and his face turned bright red. I said to him. "Alright let's go and while we are there we will tell the RSM that you were trying to sell looted goods to me and then we will see who will be in the most trouble." He went back to wringing his hands in front of him saying. "Look honest I found the watch just lying on the ground where it was dropped I will take it back to Battalion HQ and hand it in there's been no harm done." I was just about to say that this wasn't good enough when S/Sgt Ted Wallace came around the corner Stanley's face went white and he tried to scuttle off faster than a frightened spider. But Ted had

spotted him and said. "Stanley you piece of shit what are you doing here you have been told about hanging around the line we don't want your type around here?" Stanley visibly shook saying. "I had to collect some paperwork Staff and I was on my way back to HQ when I met lad." I butted in and said. "He's a fucking liar Ted he was trying to sell me a German watch he said he had found." He stuttered a reply. "That's right I found a watch and was offering it to the lad but as a present not for money", I looked on in amazement. Ted said to him. "You have been warned about this kind of thing before but you have always got away with it but I will tell you now if I ever catch you selling looted property I will shoot you out of hand", and from the look on Ted's face we knew he would. He continued saying. "Now get your arse out of our trench and don't let me see you round here again." Then Ted held his hand out as he told Stanley. "Oh and you better give me that watch I will see that it is turned in to the proper authorities. He looked at one stage like he might argue but the look on Ted's face mad him think twice and he handed over the watch and beat a hasty retreat back to Battalion HQ.

As he walked past me he said out of the corner of his mouth. "Tommy Smith was right about you being a trouble maker but mark my words I will get even with you for this." I worked the bolt on my rifle shoving a bullet into the spout but this was enough for Stanley and he set off down the trench like a scalded cat. As I watched him go I though he's a mate of Smiths who was probably in on the looting and other pilfering as well. Ted Wallace came up to me and asked. "What was all that shite about then?" I replied. "Nothing much he was just making idle threats but I don't bother about bastards that loot dead German bodies." Ted said to me. "Its not just corpses and not just Germans he robs off the living as well he also robs our boy's corpses as well." I looked at him with a stunned expression on my face as Ted continued. "We know he is doing it but it is catching him he has other people working for him and sends most of the stuff off in secret to an accomplice at one of the ports for shipment to Blighty. But it would have been just your word against his that he was trying to sell the watch and he's slippery we want to catch him at it then we can put the bastard up against a wall." I was absolutely thunderstruck at this news and didn't know what to say I looked at Ted and my mouth was working trying to form the words Ted said. "Listen if we can catch him we will shoot him but he is a cunning little bastard and you had better be careful because he will try to get back at you for causing him this trouble that's the closest he has come to getting shot." I replied. "I will watch for him but he better pray I never have him in my sights because I will show him no mercy it is bad enough looting the enemy dead but our boys as well never", and I left things there. Ted walked off saying. "Remember he is a sly bastard he might not try to give you a kicking in fact he wont because he's a fucking coward but he will try to get you back another way", and with these parting words he went on his way. So did I but I thought about him being a mate of Smiths and knew that the pair of them would try to get me back together and I also knew that I would have to do something drastic about them very soon. But at the moment I had bigger fish to fry I was now thinking of the raid tomorrow night and wondering if I would return from it in one piece or even at all.

The raid went off without serious incident we made it to the German trenches and shook them up a bit but there artillery gave us a bit of concern as we made our way back to our lines. Shortly after this we were relieved and made our way back to 'Dead Man's Farm' once again to the fatigues and working parties that awaited us there. The training kept going on with us still attacking the dummy trenches and practicing for the upcoming offensive Lt Pearson called us together and we could see that he had a large sheath of cyclostat copies in his hand which he referred to. He started his briefing saying. "Right lads listen up we are going to attack these trenches again until we can do it in our sleep." Nobby Clarke asked. "Did he say sleep or am I dreaming did he say we could go to sleep?" Nobby had a dreamy look on his face as Lt Pearson went on reading from his sheets. We attacked the dummy trenches all day long and when we returned to the farmstead that night we were all worn out. After tea we all went down to the stream at the bottom of the paddock we led about while Bert and Tommy fished for trout in it. This was not for me though and I returned to the barn to write a letter to Helen I told her not to worry and that everything was alright. I apologised for not

being able to comment on what she had written as there had been some hold up in the mail so it had been quite a bit since I had received a letter from her. I also told her that I hoped to be able to get some leave to come back home and see her and Rosie after the offensive was over I signed off as usual in the pink but I felt anything but not having any mail from her had really put a damper on my heart.

Chapter Eighteen

We were now told that we would be returning to the front line and that we would stay there until the offensive kicked off and that today we would receive our first proper briefing for the attack and that we would be attacking the dummy trenches again this was greeted by a big groan from us. It would be Major Danby who would brief us and he was joined by a new Company Officer Captain Stephen Dawes who had joined us from the 2nd Battalion. Major Danby pulled a sheaf of papers from under his arm and said. "Alright men listen up these are the Fourth Army Tactical Notes and this is what we must follow." He coughed and then continued saying. "We will be advancing in waves with two Platoons to a wave and this will be on a 400yd front and each man will have a space of 5yds between them." He consulted his sheets of paper again before he said. "Therefore our Battalion will advance in eight waves that will be two waves per Company and there will be additional waves for Battalion HQ and the stretcher bearers. When we advance it will be done at a steady walking pace and I stress there will be no running you will keep the line and make sure that you all advance at the same pace. We looked at one another and I can tell you that we were not happy about what had just been said I mean why were we walking instead of running?" The Major continued speaking. "We will be part of the 31st Division and will be in the leading wave of the attack altogether you will have to carry about seventy pounds of equipment. This will consist of your small pack, rifle and bayonet around 250 rounds of ammunition, 4grenades, a spade, empty sandbags, wire cutters, flares and anything else that you may need. He let this sink into our heads before he said. "The later waves will be carrying the same as you but in addition Vickers and Lewis machine guns and ammo, barbed wire and stakes plus what ever else is needed to consolidate the enemy terrain we capture in the attack."

Major Danby wiped his face with a large khaki hanky before saying. "It is our job in the first wave to capture and hold the first four enemy trench lines and to consolidate them. The other waves and reserves will then pass through us and continue to sweep the enemy before them." He once more consulted his sheaves of paper before he said. "Our Division the 31st has been given the job of forming the defensive flank of the whole Fourth Army this will involve us driving east to capture the village of Serre and then turning north and consolidating our gains." After the briefing was finished we got once more to attack the mocked up trenches but this time we had men with flags simulating the creeping artillery barrage whilst we walked in a line behind it and wondered to ourselves what this would be like with more than seventy pounds of equipment on your person. We got back to the farmstead and we were dog tired but we still had to get our stuff ready for the trip to the front line. Bert said to us as we were sitting outside smoking afterwards. "Well what do you think lads dose this offensive stand a chance or what?" Frank replied. "I'm not happy about the amount of equipment that we will have to carry it could make the attack dicey to say the least." George chipped in saying. "I'm sure with the bombardment that we are being given that it will be alright after all everyone says that it will be a walkover." Bert snarled at him. "What are you on about it wont affect you anyway your with HQ Company and will be one of the last to go over the top." Georges face went red but he never replied to what Bert had said instead he just sat there quite and didn't say another word. We all looked at Bert in amazement for what he had said was wrong we were all in this together and it was tantamount to calling George a shirker. Bert however seemed to realise that he had overstepped the mark and he looked a bit shamefaced and kept his head down for a bit after.

Nobby Clarke now gave his opinion. "I agree with Frank all that kit on our backs and then walking across to the enemy lines as well I just hope these idiots know what they are doing?" A bloke called Mick Jones said. "Haig must know what he's doing after all he's an experienced General." Dusty Miller who was sat with us laughed as he replied. "Its true Haig's a General but he's a cavalryman and no cavalryman has ever been any good to the poor bloody infantry. Mark my words son we will get the shitty end of the stick when it comes to this attack." Soon after this our little gathering broke up and we all went off to finish sorting our stuff out and to get an early night before we moved up front tomorrow. I said goodnight to the lads and climbed into my blanket praying that the rampaging nightmares would stay away.

We moved into the front line trenches in the early hours and the Scottish Battalion we took over from told us that everything was pretty Tres Bon. They said that as a matter of fact the Germans were being unusually quite apart from trying the odd prisoner raid or two and to tell the truth they were being much too quite. I was talking to Bert and Frank when all hell let loose and Bert yelled. "What the fuck is going on?" His face was a pasty white and we had to shout to each other to hear ourselves over the crescendo of sound that was now overwhelming us. The first salvo had gone off with one big crash but now the artillery rippled all along and behind the front and you could see the flashes going off like the devils light show. They fired in a stuttico of noise that left you stood with your mouth opened in awe and amazement at what man was capable of producing. I went to the trench periscope and watched as the opening salvos of fire from our artillery landed on the Hun positions. It was Saturday the 24th of July 1916 and this was the opening of our five day bombardment that would pave the way for the 'Big Push'. The noise was overwhelming as 1,010 field guns, 182, heavy guns 245 howitzers and 100 mixed French guns opened up on the German trenches and rear areas. I don't know about the Huns but we were shitting ourselves from the noise alone and I wouldn't have like to be standing where any of this lot was falling. Now as the guns settled down into their rhythm you could hear the different types of guns the howitzers would cough their shells out and they sounded a bit like the trench-mortars only about twenty times as loud. We could also hear the crash of the big guns as they fired and the silences as they reloaded then the crashes would start all over again.

H.E. was plastering the German trenches while shrapnel was being fired to destroy the German wire in front of the Hun trenches then we would be just able to stroll through. It was pretty hard to see anything as the weather was atrocious with torrential rain and thunderstorms adding to the misery and the noise of the guns. Nobby Clarke came along his waterproof cape running with water he came up to our position and shouted. "Bloody hell Billy Boy we never saw anything like this on Gallipoli if we had a third of this stuff we would have blown old Johnny Turk away." I replied. "Your right Nobby we could have done with some of this artillery it would have saved quite a few lives." It was now nearly impossible to hold a conversation for the noise and so we kept mainly quite taking it in turns to look through the periscope at what was happening on the enemy side. We moved backwards and forwards between the reserve trenches and the front line ones. But it wasn't that much quieter in the reserve trenches especially when the German artillery sent a barrage over and plastered them. Eventually though things settled down and we got to be quite fond of the reserve trenches as they were much better than the front line ones. We had returned to the front line when the barrage lifted onto the rear areas of the German positions this at least made it a little quieter and you could at least now shout a conversation at each other as the guns thundered on and the rain came down. A raid had been planned for further down the trenches it was to go in and see what damage had been done to the wire and the German troops. We had to know if the bombardment had wiped out the German presence in the front line trenches and we prayed that it had. Then word was passed down the line that the raid had gone over the top and we listened from our vantage point for any noise. All of a sudden we heard the sound of rifle and machine gun fire and then flares lit up the night sky where the raid was taking place.

Bert said. "That's rifle and machine gun fire and it isn't ours." We listened again and it wasn't long before Bert continued saying. "That's bombs going off now they must have stuck", and we listened to the explosions. It was Frank's turn now as he said. "That's more than one machine gun firing and I say it's jolly decent of them they must have ammo to burn." The artillery had been concentrating on the German rear areas but now some of it concentrated on the front line again and we could see the muzzle flashes of the guns behind us lighting up the sky. Then we heard the shells whistle and moan overhead but they were firing long and hitting the German reserve trenches instead of the front line ones. CSM Dobby came along he lit his pipe and puffed on it quite contentedly nothing seemed to bother him and he just took everything in his stride. Nobby turned to him and said. "What's happening Sir did the raid go well did they get in?" He replied. "No not really the raiding party didn't get in they bogged down before the German wire which by the way is nearly all in tact. So are their troops the raiders said the trenches were packed with German soldiers jeering and calling them. Frank said. "But Sir we were told that wire would be taken out then we could just walk across. The CSM looked at him with pity in his eyes saying. "Well that just goes to show Lord don't always believe everything you are told. The artillery are using shrapnel to cut the wire in order to do this the fuses on the shells must be cut exact. But it would seem that you long range snipers can't even get that right", and he spat on the floor in disgust. This information put a feeling of dread in all of us and we felt scared and angry about it and we were not alone both Brigade and Battalion were worried about the lack of damage. But it didn't worry Division one bit or the General Staff then again it wasn't them that would be going over the top and having to face the wire with us.

Stretcher parties came past us with black faced men on them who had been wounded whilst taking part in the raid. Then S/Sgt Ted Wallace appeared and said. "This is no good lads those bum boys on the Staff will want another raid this time to grab prisoners and you can bet your life that the Hun will be waiting for us." He shook his head disgustedly as he continued saying. "I will tell you something else if the bombardment after all this time and concentration hasn't touched their wire then its god help us when we go over the top lads." Ted was right and the next night we had to put a raid over in our sector to grab one or more prisoners if we could. Once again the task had fell to Ted Wallace and he made sure that Frank and I would be going with him as well. I said to Ted. "I know you want me on the raids with you because I'm a good marksman but I wish you would find someone else because one of these times our luck is going to run out and when that happens its good bye so next time choose someone else. Ted apologised saying. "Sorry Billy Boy I quite forgot how many raids we had been on but you are a sort of good luck charm to me and anyway who wants to live forever?" We went over the top that night and I was one of the riflemen and Frank had his homemade cosh a pistol and some bombs he was part of the snatch party that was once again led by Lt Pearson. We edged our way forward across 'No Man's Land' and I stopped with Ted Wallace as the snatch party crawled on towards the German wire and the front line trench. Then all of a sudden a voice shouted in guttural English. "Come on you dam Tommie's we are ready and waiting for you", and the whole of the German line in our sector opened up firing. It was fucking chaos as explosions went off near us and then the rifles and machine guns fired in our direction flares whooshed up lighting up the sky and ground below them. I opened fire and just kept shooting as the snatch party came hurtling back through us making their way back to our lines.

I could see that they were dragging a prisoner with them who looked half unconscious but they weren't stopping for anybody or anything. Ted Wallace said to me. "Right Billy Boy lets get out of here there's nothing to keep us here now", so we did faster than a Scotsman sinks a free drink. With a lot of difficulty we made it back to our lines whilst the German troops jeered and fired a hell of a lot of ordinance at us. After we got back we learned that for one prisoner we had lost four men killed and three wounded. When we got back to our dugout I talked to Frank who said. "The Huns were waiting for us and we didn't get anywhere near the trenches before all hell broke loose." I replied. "You don't need to tell me about it remember I was there myself." He continued saying. "Lt Pearson told us to scarper and that the game was up we had already started to take casualties. Then low and behold a lone German lad bumps into me don't ask me what he was doing out there because

I don't know but you cant look a gift horse in the mouth can you?" He shook his head laughing at the memory and said. "Any way I tapped him on the scull and me and Dusty hoisted him up between us and dragged him back to our lines". Frank continued saying. "Still I must admit he wasn't the best specimen of German manhood that I've seen and he certainly wasn't worth the deaths of our blokes but I suppose the shits on the Staff are happy." Little did we know that they weren't and that they would send out more and more prisoner raids in the coming days? Ted Wallace turned up and had a chat with us saying. "Bloody hell lads I'm getting to old for this kind of excitement it was getting far too hairy out there for awhile don't you think?" I replied. "Your not bloody kidding me and Frank have just been talking about it did you know it was him that captured the prisoner?" He said. "Yes and Battalion are very pleased so is Major Danby and there the ones that matter." Ted left our dugout and went back to his own and we got our heads down as it had been a pretty stressful night.

A few days later we were all packed into our trench in the pre dawn light weighed down with our kit and waiting for the offensive to kick off in about half an hour. We were loaded like pack-horses and we could hardly move out bodies in the confines of the trench as we had so much kit and were so packed together. The rain continued to fall and we were wet and miserable as well and our nerves were stretched tighter than a virgin's knicker elastic. Then we heard the shouted order echoing through the trenches to 'Stand Down' as the attack had been called off for some reason. The tension went out of our bodies and you could hear the sighs of relief all through the trench lines we had no idea why it had been cancelled only that it meant we wouldn't be walking through the shadow of the valley of death today. Bert smiled and said. "Well there's a turn up for the book", as we finally managed to get our kit off after the rest of the waves had returned to the reserve trenches. Nobby grumbled. "Thank the lord for that because I will tell you something the weight of this kit is no bloody joke its bad enough just standing here in it imagine what it will be like walking towards the German lines with it on. RSM Greaves was going round so I asked him. "Can you tell us why it was cancelled Sir I mean what went wrong?" He replied. "I know it's a bit of a let down lads but it seems the weather is to blame it's so bad that the fly boys from the R.F.C. can't spot for the artillery and tell them where there shells are landing which isn't very good for us." He looked at us grinned and continued saying. "So the bombardment has been extended for two days when the weather is supposed to pick up. That means we will now go over the top on Saturday the 1st of July and let's just hope this two days of further bombardment finally sorts the Huns out." He wandered off doing his rounds as Bert said. "The 1st of July that sounds like a good omen lets hope we get the luck", and so the bombardment continued. But at least the Staff had got one thing right for a change because about two hours after the assault had been cancelled the rain stopped and cleared away and the afternoon was bright and sunny.

The next day we were once again briefed on what was going to happen during the attack Major Danby told us. "Our Battalion will be in the first wave of the attack along with some Pal's Battalions from Yorkshire and our Company Platoons will be in this first wave." He consulted his notes again saying. "The first wave will move forward through the wire at 7:20hrs they will then lie down on the white tapes that will have been laid out in 'No Man's Land'. Once again he looked at his sheave of notes before he continued. "A whirlwind barrage will be directed at the German front line trenches and this will last for ten minutes. Then at 7:30hrs whistles will be sounded and the first wave of the attack will walk towards the German trenches there will be no running." The Major smiled at us and said. "With a bit of luck the Germans will be finished and we should be able to walk over and secure their trenches as per the plan then the second and corresponding waves will follow the first wave and as they pass through us we will consolidate our gains." He now looked directly at us saying. "All that is left for me to say is good luck for tomorrow and that you should be proud to take part in this offensive it is the biggest one mounted in this war by our army and it should help relieve the pressure on our French allies at Verdun." The briefing broke up and we went off to get ready for tomorrow each one of us with our own thoughts and more than a little fear coursing through our veins. All sorts of thoughts ran through your head you asked yourself if tomorrow you would be killed or maimed and left to lie in terrible pain suffering limbs blown off or blindness or a

thousand other wounds you could receive. Then the thought would enter your head am I strong enough to do this or will I runaway like a coward when the going gets rough. But then the thought of your friends came into your head and you knew there was no way you could let them down and so some respite came from the doubts. I went to sleep thinking about Helen I could not think of letting her down but at the same time if I was killed I couldn't bear being parted from her.

Chapter Nineteen

Saturday the 1st of July dawned bright and beautiful the colour of the sun in the sky and the warmth at this time of the morning probably meant that we would get a scorching hot day later on. The birds were singing in the sky and no one would have thought that there was any kind of conflict going on round here. It was 6:45 hrs and we were in the forward trench with the other waves behind us I was weighed down with a bandolier of ammunition and I carried another one in my small pack along with my spare socks rations and shaving gear. I was carrying a full canteen of water and had my rifle with the bayonet fixed to it. On the back of my small pack I had a rolled up ground sheet and a spade attached to it and then fixed onto the flap I had a buffed up triangle of tin. This was supposed to reflect the sun so that the R.F.C. pilots could see us from there vantage point above and plot our advance which would then be relayed to the Staff. I was also carrying a load of empty sandbags I had a pair of wire cutters attached to my belt plus I was carrying five mills bombs and a load of flares as well. Earlier on we had breakfast and we had tea served with rum init and believe you me that was a drink fit for heroes. The Officers stood checking their watches every five seconds Bert turned and said to me. "So this offensive is to take the pressure off the French at Verdun is it?" I just shrugged my shoulders but Nobby on my far side replied. "Fuck the Frogs who's bothered about them this 'Big Push' is so we can finish the bloody Hun off once and for all. As we waited nerves started to play up and I saw men praying and doing all kinds of rituals that they thought would keep them safe. I pulled Helens locket out opened it and kissed her photo then put it back then I kissed the ring on my finger praying to god to keep me safe and deliver me back to my loved ones. Frank said. "I don't mind telling you that I have a few butterflies in my stomach and I think they are wearing pit boots and doing a flaming jig." A young soldier who I didn't know shouted. "Don't worry Corporal there will be nothing left of the Germans not after the pounding we have given them."

There was a silence and I said to him. "So you know this with your vast knowledge of warfare and the few weeks training you have had. Well you listen to me they told us that on Gallipoli and half of our men were wiped out in the first half hour this was done by the troops we had been told would be finished by our artillery", and I glared at him. He wound his neck back in and never said another word six months ago I would have probably felt sorry for him but not now. We in the first wave were up against the forward wall of the trench waiting to climb the ladders to the top. The second wave stood behind us and was leaning against the back wall waiting to take our place as soon as we went over the top the third wave would then take there place and so on. A shell crashed down about thirty yds to our right this unnerved everyone then news came down that a Lieutenant and three other ranks had been killed and another eleven seriously injured. Included in the injured was Captain Dawes who had just joined us he was carrying some orders to that part of the trench line when the shell exploded. This was the time now to gird the loins or tighten the old asshole before the brown stuff ran down your legs for all to see. CSM Dobby was stood behind us smoking his pipe and as relaxed as ever the barrage from our side had intensified since 6:00hrs the CSM said. "Don't forget that we will go over the top at 7:20hrs and wait for the final ten minutes of the barrage to finish in 'No Man's Land' then at 7:30hrs we will move forward as the attack begins." He stopped a moment to relight his pipe before he continued. "When we start off be careful as the sun will be shining right in our eyes and that is not to our advantage." Nobby asked him. "Why 7:30hrs Sir why didn't we go

at first light?" The CSM pointed his pipe stem at him and replied. "The timing has something to do with the French at Verdun but don't you worry about that with everything that has been going on over the last few months you can bet your life that the Huns are expecting us", and he went off to talk to the next lot along leaving us stood there with that cheery thought.

We began to say our farewells to each other Frank turned to me saying. "Take care of yourself out there Billy Boy keep an eye on me and I will see you in the enemy trenches." I replied. "You to Frank and the best of look lets just hope we can all stick together" and we shook hands. Next it was Bert who said. "Well old pal what can I say you have been through all this before and survived we are the ones who are out of our depths and could do with some luck but you make sure that you survive because you are my best mate", and we too shook hands. Nobby Clarke shouted. "All the best Billy Boy this should be a piece of piss to old Gallipoli veterans like us so keep the faith." I shouted back. "And you Nobby look after yourself and stay safe mate." Then other shouted messages came to me from further along Tommy Macey and Dusty Miller amongst them and even S/Sgt Ted Wallace shouted a fond farewell to me. The minutes ticked slowly by and then out of nowhere I shouted. "God I wish Elijah Mack and George were with us then everything would go alright I'm sure" and those around me nodded even Bert. Then the order we had been dreading came as Lt Pearson said. "First wave move up to the start lines come on get up top and out to the tapes." We all shouted good luck to each other for the final time and shook hands again with our friends and comrades who were the nearest thing to family we had. We went over the top climbing the ladders which was a herculean task in itself weighed down like we were with equipment. Moving into 'No Man's Land' going about one hundred yds we looked for the white tapes that marked the start point but they had been blown away by the artillery barrage. So our Officers told us to lie down where we were and to wait for the whistles that would start the attack. I looked behind and saw that the second wave had emerged from the trench and was lying down behind us. I looked at my watch and saw that it had just gone 7:20hrs then a loud sound came to our ears from far away and the ground beneath us trembled as though in an earthquake this was a mine at Hawthorn Ridge that had been detonated. As we watched the whirlwind barrage crashed down onto the German front line throwing earth, chalk and flames into the air. Then it started lifting and moving on it was then that I heard Lt Pearson saying. "It's moved on to early it isn't time yet there's still three minutes to go." However it didn't matter someone obviously thought it was 7:30hrs because the whistles started shrilling and our wave rose up and we walked on towards the German positions.

A major who I didn't know had a white sack with him and he said to Frank. "Here you are Corporal just kick this in front of you and then follow it", and he handed Frank a football. Then he shouted who ever reaches the ball first can kick it onwards but don't chase after it always kick it and walk towards it" as the whistles kept shrilling Frank gave the ball a good kick we moved forward following its path and keeping our formation. Then I heard the rat tat rat tat of the German machine guns and I could hear the hail of bullets whip cracking as they scythed towards us through the grass. It was then they started tearing into our formation and I saw big gaps appear in our line I watched as Frank dropped face down his tin helmet rolling along the grass. Then I saw Nobby Clarke throw his hands up looking almost like a ballet dancer until he too dropped into the grass. The German machine guns scythed through our wave as though they were cutting hay and the swishing sound they made reminded me of this. As I looked along the line I saw two officers from Able Company killed in as many seconds and I knew that this was going to be another almighty cock-up. I watched as Lt Pearson stopped beside Arthur Tillie who had lost an eye and I passed him as he bent over Arthur and that was the last I ever saw of either of them.

I went to ground in a shell hole and watched as the Germans poured back into their trenches the barrage hardly seemed to have touched them and this went for the wire as well which was still intact. I looked back towards our start line and could see that the other waves had fared no better than ours and it was hard to comprehend the slaughter. But also I could see small groups of individuals moving forwards despite the odds and closing in on the German trenches. I shrugged out

of my pack and got rid of a lot of the other weight I had been carrying. This was one of the biggest reasons we had been almost decimated that and the stupid order to walk. Because if we hadn't had the extra weight and we could have run then we would have got into the forward German trenches before their machine gun crews and troops could pour back into them and then there would have been a different outcome. Someone came sliding into my shell hole with an avalanche of stone earth and grit I was just about to give them a mouthful when I saw who it was. Bert had a grim look on his face but when he saw me it changed instantly to a big grin and we hugged each other. I said to him. "Get your pack off and the rest of that shit it is easier to move and we must be able to do this if we are going to try to press forward or get back." Bert shrugged his pack off and then he started shaking and I asked. "Are you alright mate you look a little unsteady?" He looked at me and in his eyes I saw a vision of hell as he replied. "I just never expected this to happen I should have listened to you and Nobby I believed them when they said this would be a walkover. Some fucking walkover this turned out to be it is like a bloody butchers shop out there." I said to him. "Yes me and Nobby knew from Gallipoli what to expect but not as bad as this and as for Nobby he doesn't know anything anymore he bought it shortly after we set off and I saw Frank go down as well.

Bert looked at me with large eyes and I could see the shock he had received at the news of Frank and Nobby. I knew exactly how Bert felt but there was no time to stop and tend the wounded not with the rate of fire that the Germans were laying down. Anyone would have liked to have stopped and comforted their friends and seen what they could do for them but it would have been suicide to even try. But now to make things even worse the Germans started firing shrapnel shells from their hidden batteries behind Serre. The shrapnel flayed the ground and pattered down on us like hailstone only this stuff that dropped from the sky was deadly. I took a couple of hits and so did Bert but they were not serious in fact I had been hit in the hand and could see the small shrapnel ball under the skin. The shell fire moved on to our trenches and the other waves and reserves that were crammed into them. I now looked back to where the German fire had been concentrated against our Battalion and the carnage was unbelievable and it broke my heart just to look. I peeked over the lip of the hole again and to my surprise I saw Colonel Terry, Major Melstone and RSM Greaves in a shell hole close to ours with a few more of the lads with them. Looking now towards the German trench line I noticed that the machine gun fire had stopped but I couldn't understand why at first. It was then that I saw a burly German gunner with red bristly hair on his head and a face like a constipated pig trying to free a stoppage on the gun. He banged away furiously with what looked like a hammer but whatever had caused the gun to fail he couldn't repair it and it was well and truly jammed. Colonel Terry had seen this and shouted. "Right lads lets get in there before he manages to get that gun working again" and he sprang up followed by the others in his hole. Me and Bert followed them and I saw a few more survivors leap up and run forward too and I could see that they had ditched their packs as well.

We hit the German trench yelling like banshees and rolled right over the top of them we threw Mills bombs into the trench then stood on top pouring rifle fire into the survivors. The piggy looking German gunner lashed out at me with the hammer but I soon put a stop to him spitting him on my bayonet. I pushed it into his stomach and after some initial resistance it slid in like it was going through butter he looked at me with surprise and hurt on his face as he tried to stop the bayonet with his hands. By then it was too late and the whole length of the blade was inside his body and he fell backwards onto the trench floor while I held onto my rifle keeping the bayonet firmly lodged in his guts. He was still feebly trying to paw at the thing that was causing him so much pain and his heels drummed a tattoo on the floor. I tried to pull the bayonet out but it would not budge his flesh was holding it in what you might call a death grip. I was wrestling it and getting more frantic in my efforts to remove it then I remembered what we had been told in bayonet practice when I had first joined up. I pulled the trigger on my rifle and the recoil released the blade which came out with a sucking slurping sound. The pig faced German made a sound like one of those mama dolls the kids have a kind of high pitched squeaking as the air left his body. I kicked him as I went past and then dropped into the trench with the others we looked back towards our trench line but there were no

other waves coming forward. I looked at my watch and it was now only 8:15hrs and it had taken less than three quarters of an hour to wipe out most of the Battalions in this sector and so effectively put paid to the attack. Then Colonel Terry said. "Come on lads lets consolidate this trench and then all we have to do is wait until the rest of the waves come forward and reach us." I looked at his face and could tell he was lying he knew as well as we did that there would be no more waves or if there was they would get no farther forward than ours had.

In fact there was no sign of the reserves or anything else and that didn't bode well for us you could look back towards our trench line and see where the waves had been massacred this morning. The trench we were in had suffered some shell damage so we set about doing what we could to repair it. Some of the lads found some old wire entanglements that had been snapped off in the shelling we dragged these around and placed them behind us facing the other German trenches. Then RSM Greaves asked. "Have any of you still got any Mills bombs with you a few of us still had and so he said. "Right follow me then and on the count of three we will lob them down this bunker entrance alright one, two, three", and we all through threw our bombs down the entrance of the bunker. We all took cover and there was a series of muffled explosions as they detonated and grey white dust spewed up and out of the entrance. He went over to our Officers and said to them. "Its too deep to do any real damage but it will have blocked it enough to trap them down there and if they cant dig themselves out then so much the better", an evil smile lit up his face as he told them this. I turned to Bert and asked. "Are you all right you do know that you are wounded don't you?" He replied. "Yes but so are you anyway they don't hurt much do yours?" I said. "No they are just scratches really nothing to write home about", I looked at the blood that had run down my hand and had stained my uniform pants. Major Melstone and RSM Greaves came over to us and the RSM said, "Right young Lamb you are now a Lance Corporal the Colonel has made you up in the field now hold out your arm." He then drew a stripe on my arm with chalk saying this will be confirmed when things are a bit more sorted out but it is a genuine promotion. But right now get up on the back wall of the trench and watch for a German counter attack and I don't want you sunbathing or daydreaming up there if you get the chance pick a few of their Officers off.

I did as he told me hardly daring to believe that I had been promoted and looking every now and again at the chalk stripe on my arm. I scrambled up onto the apron on the back wall of the trench where I could see the other German trenches and keep an eye on them. Meanwhile Major Melstone was trying to get the broken machine gun going with some of the other lads this would give us some much needed firepower in case the Huns counterattacked. I could see that in the other German trenches men were now stood out on the parapets cheering and shouting and they had even moved their machine guns out on top of them to have a better field of fire. I looked through my sight and saw a huge fat German Officer stood next to a machine gun cheering I took careful aim and shot him through the chest and he fell back into the trench as the gunners looked round in amazement at what had just occurred. I think they must have been either very confused or very stupid as they never moved before I shot them one at a time. The rest were not as slow though and dived back into the trench to get away from the sudden death that had visited them and I never saw so much as a hair on their head again while I was on watch.

The morning moved on and the sun climbed higher into the clear blue sky and beat down like a hammer on an anvil we had drained our water bottles and thirst was now beginning to get to us. Colonel Terry thought that the situation was so serious that he sent some of the lads crawling out to see if they could pick up any water bottles from the dead Germans or from our dead as well then we rolled the dead Germans onto the parapet and out of the trench to lessen the smell and flies we knew that would soon come in this heat. We could hear the cries of the wounded from 'No Man's Land' as they suffered from their wounds and the heat that beat down on them as they lay in the open. We watched but no more waves or reserves emerged from our trench lines the horror of the debacle that had just happened must still have been sinking in to those still in the trenches. The Germans however seemed content to let their artillery deal with any further attacks that might be

forming up. Instead they concentrated on pouring fire into the unlucky wounded lying out to their front and they would fire at anything that moved or moaned. As I watched I felt an anger that I had never known before and I swore to myself that any German I saw from now on wounded or alive would receive the same treatment that they were now dishing out to our lads. Bert said to me. "They are shooting our wounded out there Billy Boy the fucking bastards." I replied. "I know Bert but our turn will come and we will avenge them."

It was now that the Colonel turned to us as we finished blocking off each end of the trench so we could defend it better he said. "We seem to be somewhat in a bind here lads and to tell you the truth I don't really see another attack being sent forward at this time." He removed his cap and mopped his forehead with his hanky before he continued. "We seem to be stuck here isolated and in my opinion we haven't a chance in stopping a German counterattack which they will launch sooner or later. Just to emphasise this point a 'Flying Pig' landed further down the trench in an explosion of flying earth and chalk with bits of dead German thrown in. The Colonel looked to where the smoke still lingered and then said. "We will try to hold out for as long as possible in the hope that the attack may proceed later but we must be ready to make our way back to our own lines should it be impossible to hold on here." I didn't think this would be long as the Germans had now turned their attention to us and the trench we occupied and rifle and machine gun fire poured into our small enclave. There was one good thing though the lads that had been sent out to retrieve water bottles returned laden with some and carrying bottles of German soda water as well. The soda water had gone a bit flat but we mixed everything together with the other stuff and drank our fill then we filled our water bottles and there was still plenty left. Colonel Terry announced that he was pleased with the water situation and that it would allow us to stay here that bit longer. He told us that there was nothing worse for sapping a man's strength and moral than thirst especially in conditions like this.

Well we still held out and we had been joined by a few more blokes who had managed to make it this far which was just as well because we had casualties from the steady German fire that still came our way. Dusty Miller had made it in and S/Sgt Ted Wallace had turned up as well he made his way over to where we stood and shouted. "Well Ill be blowed its Corporal Lamb now is it what escapee from a lunatic asylum made you up?" A voice from behind him replied. "That would have been Colonel Terry S/Sgt and I don't think he would like being called a lunatic", stood there was RSM Greaves. Ted's face went bright red and he stuttered out. "No offence Sir just a joke between us and I have the greatest respect for the Colonel and his decisions." The RSM stared at him suspiciously and then said. "Right Ted let us know what happened to you we are trying to piece together everyone's stories to get a larger picture of what's happening." Ted went on to say. "After the initial attack I found myself in a shell hole with Pte Miller the machine guns were still spraying the area and so we laid low for a while." The RSM said to Ted. "There have been a few of us hiding in shell holes this morning and there is no shame in that the assault was finished after the first hundred yards." Ted continued saying. "We were over on the far right and we saw when you and the rest ran forward to take this trench so we were determined to join up with you and see what happened from then. But it took us longer than I thought to make our way over here but eventually we made it." The RSM slapped him on the back saying. "The main thing is that you got here in one piece because lord knows we need all the men we can get." Ted said. "There is one more thing Sir on our way across 'No Man's Land' we found a lot of examples of the looting of our dead." The RSMs face went purple as he shouted. "What vermin as been looting our boys if it's those German bastards they have made their worst enemy and I will not show any of them any mercy whatsoever", and a vein started throbbing on the side of his temple. Ted replied. "It wasn't the Germans Sir from what we could make out it was our troops Sir wasn't it Miller?" Dusty said. "Yes Sir they looked like stretcher bearers but I couldn't see who they were for they were quite a distance from us and by the time me and the S/Sgt tried to get to them they had disappeared."

The RSM had gone quite now but then he pointed to all of us saying. "I want those bastards found if it's possible and don't be taking them prisoner death is the sentence for what there doing and I want it carried out." We all nodded and I knew that there wasn't one man here who wouldn't gladly carry out that order. The RSM Mover off towards the Officers no doubt to tell them about what had happened but Dusty and Ted stayed with us we sat down for a moment and I passed the smokes round we lit up then Ted said. "I didn't say anything to the RSM but I will tell you one thing I could swear that one of those corpse robbers was Stanley and the other one was that short Oppo he hangs around with." I pricked my ears up at this knowing that the other bastard with him could only be Smith and I was itching to get hold of the pair of them. Ted handed me a long blanket wrapped parcel tied with twine and that had a twine strap on it for carrying I opened it knowing by the feel what it was as he said. "There's a little present for you I picked it up before we went over the top because I knew you would be needing it out here." I loved it for it was my Mauser snipers rifle I hefted it in my hand as Ted laughed saying. "Well at least there's plenty of ammo out here for it", and he was right the trench floor was littered with the stuff. I emptied some of my ammunition pouches and filled them with German bullets then I made sure the magazine was full before I looked through the sights to make sure they were all right. Once again I took up the watch on the German trenches as their rate of fire increased and our losses started mounting. I picked off a few German Officers now that I had my trusty rifle with me one a tall slender man with a Prussian haircut I shot right through the forehead as he peeped over the edge of their trench. I watched them through the sight and I saw a fair amount of troops gathering over in there trenches so I shouted to Ted Wallace. "You had better get the RSM and Officers it looks like the Huns are about to launch a counterattack." Ted brought them and the Colonel and the rest came up to my position the Colonel looked up at me and asked. "What is it you can see Cpl Lamb?" As he got his field glasses out I told him. "The enemy have men concentrated in the trench opposite us and I think they are about to launch an attack on us Sir." He scanned the trench with his glasses and replied. "Yes I think you are right it looks like they are about to come at us in force."

He turned to Major Melstone and asked. "How are we doing with that Hun machine gun have you got it working yet?" The Major replied. "No Sir I'm afraid its kaput a cartridge jammed in the breech and the German gunner smashed the cocking handle trying to free it nothing short of an armourers workshop will get that working again." S/Sgt Wallace said. "There's a Lewis gun two shell holes over and if I get another volunteer we could fetch it back with its ammo." Colonel Terry replied. "That's splendid news Staff you get your man and get going because I don't think time is on our side." Before Ted could say anything I piped up. "Ready when you are Staff lets go and get it." He grinned at me saying. "Well thank you Corporal Lamb it saves me having to press gang someone." We set off from the right hand side of the trench running as soon as we hit 'No man's Land' we had nothing with us but the Majors and Colonels pistols so we were really travelling light I had left my rifle with Bert and told him to look after it. As soon as we got out of the trench we attracted gunfire and bullets flew everywhere buzzing around like bees in a honey pot. We went to ground in the first shell hole and we kept our heads down until we could make a dash to the crater with the Lewis gun in it. Ted picked the gun up and I grabbed the haversack full of its drum shaped magazines from the body of one of the gun crew and then we started on our perilous journey back to the trench. We made it as far as the first shell hole but now the Germans were really zeroes in on us and it was almost impossible to raise your head without having it shot off. Ted Wallace said to me. "It's a bit hairy out there at the moment I bet there are a few brown stains in the back of your pants?" I replied. "I bet I'm not the only one and if this keeps up the stains won't be brown but red with blood." He grinned at me saying. "Well no rest for the wicked and we must have been fucking evil to be in this kind of mess." We waited while our lads pored out covering fire and then we bonded out of the shell hole and threw ourselves into the trench. Bullets sought us out and pattered and rattled behind us as we slid down the wall of the trench into what was comparative safety.

The Colonel was there to welcome us and said. "Well done you pair that was a fine job and I see that you have brought some extra ammunition as well that's even better." We pulled the

bandoliers off our bodies that we had collected and gave them out to the lads. RSM Greaves said to me. "You have been on a Lewis gun course Corporal Lamb so get it set up where it will do the most damage and pick yourself a loader." I grabbed Bert who gave me my snipers rifle back I hung this off my shoulder gave him the haversack of magazines and picked up the Lewis gun saying. "Come on Bert lad lets go and get this little beauty set up and give the Huns a taste of their own medicine." We set the gun up in its own little post in a small sap that led out the back of the trench facing the German trenches. The RSM came along a short time later and said. "This is a good place you've chosen here Corporal Lamb you should be able to rake them from here." He had a rifle and bayonet with him and he was festooned with mills bombs that he had gotten from somewhere and he seemed to epitomise all the fine points of the British soldier. He stared at where I was looking down the sight of the Lewis gun and told me. "Just what the doctor ordered a dose of number nines that should sort them out and no mistake." He had just finished saying this when the Germans launched their first charge we watched them come over the top and run towards us. I began to fire short bursts into the oncoming ranks and I was beginning to rack up quite a score as Bert changed the magazines for me. The RSM stayed at our post and pretty soon he had swapped his rifle and was throwing Mills bombs with gusto at the enemy. He threw one and it went over at about gut height just as a large German Captain ran along towards it well we knew there could only be one conclusion. They collided at belt buckle height and the grenade exploded ripping and shredding his entrails and flesh and erupting all over the men beside him. The Officer had a hole where his stomach used to be and he hit the ground like a felled tree as the RSM said. "He won't be eating anymore sauerkraut or sausages." We kept up a withering fire and eventually the Huns gave up but we knew it would only be for a short time as they retreated to their trench licking their wounds.

Rather than attack again they were quite content to let the artillery have a go at us and they went at it with a vengeance as shrapnel hailed down onto us. Then it was the turn of the 'Jack Johnson's' and the 'Flying Pigs' and these soon had our trench running with blood. We decided that we should shelter in the entrance to the bunker that we had blown up and it was quite good only a few injuries were caused by flying pieces of rock and other projectiles and none of these was serious. Our position though was now becoming untenable and I could see that Colonel Terry was quite worried about this. We emerged from the entranceway and took stock of our position and the personnel we had left when we looked there were very few of us left of us. Dusty Miller had been killed by a shell as he tried to retrieve some ammo for us and the rest of the lads had either fallen to machine gun shrapnel or shell fire. I was sorry for Dusty he had been a good friend and a Gallipoli veteran as well and we were now getting thin on the ground with not many of us left. The Colonel spoke to us survivors. "Although I don't like saying this I feel that I must our position here now is hopeless with no hope of relief it is now time to try to get back to our own front line trenches." His face looked haggard and I knew he was disappointed that we would have to leave this German trench that had cost so many of his men's lives. He said. "Corporal Lamb I hope that you can understand but we must leave someone behind to cover our retreat. I'm sorry it has to be you because of your age but I really have no option and you have been on a Lewis gun course." I replied. "I know Sir and I will provide the covering fire while you make your way back." The Colonel smiled saying. "Good lad just you keep pouring fire into the Germans but as soon as you see we have reached a position closer to our line destroy the gun and try to get back yourself." I don't know why I was so calm on the outside I felt like I had messed my pants and knew that I would never see my lovely Helen again.

Just before we started to get ready for the retreat Ted Wallace said to the Colonel. "Sir Corporal Lamb will need a loader for the gun so I don't mind staying", I know Bert was about to say something but a look from Ted silenced him. The Colonels eyebrows raised and he looked from Ted to Bert but said. "Very well S/Sgt Wallace and thank you I know that as well as Cpl Lamb we all appreciate your gesture." I nodded my head in acknowledgement and felt a rush of affection for this hard bitten man. The Colonel then continued. "Shall we say ten minutes gentlemen the first two will go then and the rest will follow at two minute intervals and finally just let me say good luck to each of us?" Ted and I went to the Lewis gun post but not before I had said goodbye to Bert all we had

time for though was a few words and a quick hug before he was ready to leave. I turned to Ted and said. "You know that you didn't have to stop with me they would have left Bert but I appreciate it and I'm sure Bert does as well." Ted turned to me and replied. "Listen someone has to look after you and that idiot Hall is no good", I bristled at this suggestion and was about to say something when Ted continued saying. "No I'm only joking I did it because I owed you for the number of times I volunteered you." I heard the Colonel counting the time down on his watch and knew that Bert and the man with him were standing ready to go over the top and start the long journey back to our lines. It was now early afternoon and I prayed hard that Bert would make it safely across the first part of open ground and find shelter. Then I heard the Colonel say. "Ready Cpl Lamb S/Sgt Wallace thirty seconds to go?" I looked through the sight at the German trench and the Colonel shouted. "Right off you go keep down and use the shell holes for cover if you can." I knew that Bert was about to go over the top and my mouth was dry with fear for him then the Colonel said. "Covering fire, keep those Huns heads down", I felt a tap on my shoulder from Ted and I started sending short bursts from the Lewis gun over to the enemy.

I heard the RSM commentating on what was happening he said. "They have made it to the first shell crater now their having a go for the next one. I had ceased fire for the moment waiting for the next two that would go when all of a sudden the German artillery opened up again. A 5.9 screeched overhead and I heard the RSM say. "Fucking hell that fell close to their new position my heart jumped into my mouth and I felt sick at the thought of Bert blown to bits. Then I heard no their alright and the two of them are running to the next hole then it was time for the next two to go and I began firing again. The pairs kept going until finally we were down to the RSM and Colonel Terry the Colonel looked at his watch and counted down the last thirty seconds. Then he said. As soon as we are clear and on our way hold them for as long as you can and then follow us all that's left to say is good luck to you both and I hope to see you back at our lines." Those final few seconds seemed to be going at a snails pace all I could think of though was be quick and get going and then we can be on our way. But just before they went over the top the German artillery put a strafe down on our trench and we had to take shelter once more in the bunker entrance. The RSM shouted to the Colonel. "We must go after this Sir no matter what happens because this will precede another counterattack", he said this I could hear the shrapnel pattering down like hailstone on a tin roof. The artillery moved on as I returned to our machine gun post setting up the Lewis gun again the RSM and Colonel shouted farewell and then went over the top, as I poured covering fire into the German trench. As I fired I thought about what had happened to the attack and knew that nearly everyone in the Battalion I knew had been either killed or injured and my heart ached at the thought. Now the shrapnel in my hand and thigh began to hurt like hell Ted had been watching the RSM and Colonel and now he said. "They have made it to the first hole", I stopped firing. Looking round I looked at Ted's face and wondered do I look as tired and begrimed as you. He was caked in chalky dust this stuck like glue to you clothing and put a grimy film over your skin if you added the smoke and burnt powder from our rifles and bombs then you ended up with grimy chalky white looking soldier. I didn't know why I was thinking about or even bothered about appearances at a time like this but the I realised it was to stop me dwelling on what was happening it is funny how the mind can cope and always finds a way to lessen the horror.

I said to Ted. "Watch out mate here they come", as I watched the first wave leave the German trench and come towards us. I calculated the distance and then sent short bursts of fire into their ranks I watched my bullets strike home and saw men drop and I remembered the Battalion this morning. The German line was getting closer and Ted Wallace was now throwing Mills Bombs as well as acting as ammo bearer for me and we had certainly killed and wounded quite a few of the enemy. The odds however were always against us and we knew that the sheer weight of German numbers would be too much for us and that quite soon we would be over run. It was now as the German counterattack stalled that they turned tow machine guns on our trench and this made staying there untenable and suicidal. Ted threw the last of his bombs and said. "Come on lad its time we got the fuck out of here or we will be in the shit right up to our snouts." I replied. "You are not bloody

joking this is no place for a well brought up young man like me to be”, and we grinned at each other. He then turned saying. “Besides which this is the last drum of ammunition so let’s fire it off and then get the hell out of here.” I did as he said and then I grabbed my rifle as I said. “Alright let’s go”, and we fled for the relative safety of the first shell hole and dived into it. German bullets dogged our footsteps there and we could hear the swish of them as they cut a swathe through the grass behind us. We dropped down the side of the hole to the bottom where about five corpses led in different positions we took a minute to get our breaths back before I crawled back up to the lip to watch what was happening. I had to keep really still as the Germans had their machine guns trained on the whole of ‘No Man’s Land’ and any movement was met with a quick burst. We knew we could not stay this close so we waited for a while and then we ran like hell for the next shell hole. We dropped short of it into the grass and crawled forward just to make sure that no Huns were waiting for us in there, we crept up on the hole and peered over the rim of the crater. There were no Germans in there but led in the bottom of the hole was Captain Major Melstone he looked to have been badly wounded. We pulled ourselves over the edge and slid down to the bottom and Ted said. “Hello Sir how are you doing, and where are the rest?” He looked at us and I could see the pain in his eyes as he replied. “Hello Staff, Cpl Lamb I sent the rest on the Colonel and RSM wanted to stay with me but I told them that they must get back I knew that you two would be coming but I’m afraid there is little you can do for me.” We dressed his wounds and he was right he had been hit in the stomach and through the lung and I could see the life draining out of him. We tried to make him as comfortable as possible as he said to us. “You two should get on and try to make it back to our lines leave me here and save yourselves.” Ted smiled at him and replied. “The chance would be a fine thing Sir but the Huns have got the whole front covered and not even an ant could survive out there.” The Major nodded in understanding I made my way to the top of the crater to keep watch saying. “Bloody hell I could do with a cup of char or even a drink of water I am as dry as an Arabs sandal.”

Our attack on Serre had failed miserably and as I looked towards the German front line I saw the bodies of some of our lads that had made it that far lying tangled or crucified by the wire. Their bodies moved as the wire moved making them look like they were still alive or like puppets with their strings cut. I slid down to the bottom of the hole again and saw Ted and the Major talking quietly I didn’t want to disturb them and so I crawled up to the backside of the crater and looked back towards our own trenches. I thought we were closer to them but as I looked I judged that we had only made it back about a quarter of the way. I continued to scan the ground and I could see the neat lines of corpses lying there where the machine guns had caught them and you could see how far each wave had reached and I can tell you something for the price that had been paid it was no where near far enough. As I watched the Germans started to shell our whole sector of ‘No Man’s Land’ when suddenly a shell must have hit our hole and exploded, usually you can hear them and judge the direction but I didn’t hear this one. The only thing that saved me from being seriously wounded or even killed was that I was at the back of the trench and up on the edge as I watched our lines. Nevertheless it blew me out of the crater so high into the air that I could have shook hands with god if such a being could exist amongst all this slaughter. I watched as my tin helmet flew one way spinning as it went and then I was falling back to earth I hit the ground and the wind was knocked out of me and I lost consciousness for a few minutes. I came round and tried to move but I cried out in pain the whole of my body felt abused I tried feeling down myself to check for injuries but apart from feeling as though a mule had kicked the shit out of me I didn’t seem to have any serious injuries. I crawled back over to the hole aching in every bone of my body and as I dragged myself through the grass I cursed and swore under my breath and I must admit that I prayed as well. I knew that I would have done a deal with the devil and all his hordes if he could have got me out of this hell but I reckoned that even he would have been frightened by this place and would have given it a wide berth.

As I reached the hole I saw that it was deeper now and that it was still smoking from the explosion and that the earth was still warm. The small of cordite hung on the air giving off a smell of rotten eggs and as I breathed it in I could well imagine that the stench was coming from the gates of

hell itself. It was then that I saw something in the bottom of the hole it was a mess that at one time might have been a human being. Now though it was just amalgamation of flesh and smashed bone and bits of uniform that were still smouldering from the blast. I turned and threw up on the craters side and then I started to shake and I thought that I would never be able to stop. I slid down near this abomination that had once been a comrade and my eyes were drawn to it again like it was an exhibit in some kind of freak show. As I looked I saw part of a uniform sleeve on the embossed part was part of a crown and I knew without doubt that this mess was all that remained of Major Melstone a brave Officer and a good man. I looked around and saw Ted Wallace on the opposite side of the crater I made my way across him he was led against the craters side. When I got up to him I wished to god I hadn't I could see that he had lost both legs above the knee and one of his arms just below the elbow. There was blood on his shirt and gore from his lost arm and the earth where his stumps lay was soaked in blood I looked at his face which was also blackened and scorched but which otherwise wasn't so bad.

I tried to make him understand over the artillery barrage that I would try to help him as best I could because despite his terrible injuries he was still alive. I could see the shock beginning to settle in now but there was nothing I could do because I had nothing just my torn bloody scorched uniform. His left hand shot out and grabbed my arm it was then that I noticed his grip was remarkably strong almost desperate. I looked into his eyes and I never in my life again want to see the kind of naked pain and horror that I saw in them it was enough to drive a man mad. But then as I stared into them I saw something else coming forward from the back of them it was his life force and I watched as it left his eyes and the light went out in them. His hand relaxed and dropped from my arm and it fell back white against the dark earth and his whole body seemed to deflate like a child's balloon. I sat down next to him and sobbed my heart out because despite his rank and older years he had been a good friend to me. But it wasn't just Ted I was crying for I had seen a lot of death and slaughter over the past two years though I couldn't get past the horror and slaughter of today somehow it was different. Now I was crying for all my friends and comrades who had died and been seriously wounded fighting this war and believe me there were many of them.

Once again the barrage ceased and all you could hear was the screams and groaning of the wounded as they suffered in agony then you would hear the sound as the German machine guns opened up spraying bullets at each sound. It was as hot as Hades in the crater now and the smell of spilt blood and flesh was becoming overpowering and the flies were gathering again knowing they had a good feast waiting for them. I sat there and the sun beat down my lips throat and eyes were burning and I was thirstier than a drunken camel but I had no water to quench my thirst. I crawled to the top and looked out and I decided that I would have to make a dash for the shell hole to the right of the one I was in. There could have been some of our blokes in it or there might be some water there if the Germans got me then so be it anything was better than dying of thirst here. I crawled out on top and a German machine gunner must have seen the movement because he became very interested in me for a short while. I dug my fingers into the earth overcome with fear as the bullets whip cracked and scythed over the top of me. However he must have found a better target as the gun traversed away from me and did not return he must found easier pickings. I belly crawled through the grass stopping every now and again to play dead and it took me an absolute age to reach the next shell hole where I crawled to the edge and looked over. I saw a few men lying wounded in the bottom and quite a few dead lying with them. I crawled over the edge and slid down there were a few startled shouts from the wounded and then they all settled down when they saw I was one of their own and not a Hun. I looked over them and saw Sam Brown who had played the piano in the Intack Inn that Christmas in 1914 he was a member of the 2nd Battalion. I smiled at him and said. "Hey up Sam lad what are you doing with our lot I thought you were 2nd Battalion and I know that they are in reserve?" He whispered to me. "I was transferred to your Battalion and put in Charlie Company as a replacement for this show." I looked round at the rest of the wounded men in the trench most of who looked like they had given up and were now waiting either to die or be taken prisoner. Well fuck that

for a game of soldiers I was not going to be shit on like that I would make it back if I had to drag myself over the ground with my teeth.

Then I heard Sam say. "What's happening Billy Boy were is the rest of the Battalion and never mind that were are the bloody reserves?" I replied quite brutally. "Lying in rows behind us there is no more attack because there is no more Battalion it has ceased to exist", tears filled his eyes and he started trembling. I asked him how badly he was wounded he said he had been hit in the leg and arm then I asked if he could walk if I bandaged his wounds He told me that he would give it a try. I spotted a dead Lieutenant that I didn't know at the back of the hole and I made my way over to him. As I got closer I remembered Major Melstone and I was nearly sick again I got control of myself and it was then that I noticed the Lieutenants blonde hair contrasting with the dark earth of the hole. As I began to search him his dull blue eyes stared at me accusingly seeming to scream accusingly why are you still alive? I got his haversack off and found it contained some melted Fry's chocolate a packet of wafer biscuits and a can of Ticklers Jam there were also four packets of cigarettes that would come in handy. But most important I found his morphine tablets that all Officers carried and with these quite a few field dressings and some iodine. I unhooked his water bottle shaking it and finding out that it was nearly full which was good I uncorked it and took a deep drink I stoppered it again put it in the haversack and slung it on my back. I moved back over to Sam and dressed his wounds giving him one of the precious morphine tablets and finding him a rifle that he used as a crutch. I said to him. "Right Sam I need you to help me tonight I'm going to try to make it back to our lines and you can come with me if you want to? But first I want you to search the dead for water and anything else that might be useful to us and the lads here don't worry about it because they don't need anything anymore." He moved about the hole looking for anything he could find I hoped that he would be alright because he was a good bloke when it came down to it. Sam had found another four full water bottles and some dry rations along with another three packs of cigarettes which I now handed out to the wounded. I then checked them over and gave the most seriously wounded morphine tablets then I tried to set up shelters like we had on Gallipoli out of tunics propped up on pieces of wood that I found in the hole as the sun blazed down. I felt most sorry for the lads who had stomach wounds as we were not supposed to give them any water or food but I told Sam to give them some water if they wanted it because I knew that without medical aid they wouldn't last the day out.

After finishing we tried to stay in the shaded side of the crater we laid back against it and tried to conserve our energy as the day wore on. I crawled up to the top of the crater to look out and I noticed that even the Germans seemed to have given up now in the heat and only shot if any of our lads tried to make a run for it. I watched as four men made a run for another shell hole closer to our lines a German machine gun spat into life. I watched sickened as it bowled all four of them over before they had even made a few yards not one of them moved and I didn't think that they would ever move again. I slipped back down into the bottom of the crater and checked my Mauser that I had found outside the last shell hole where the explosion had thrown it I had also managed to find some of my ammo but only about twenty rounds which I had put in the Officers haversack. I lay back against the side of the crater bone tired so I shut my eyes but the visions that assailed me were straight from hell so I quickly opened them again. Instead I took some rations out of the haversack and said to Sam. "Here get some of these down your neck", and I offered him some of the dry rations. He turned to me and replied. "No thanks Billy Boy I really appreciate it but I really couldn't eat anything right now." I told him. "We have to eat to get our strength up for our run tonight." He tried a bite but he nearly choked and spit it out I tried one swallow then had to give up as well so instead we had a drink of water and a smoke. I still had my precious cigarette case that Helen had given to me that first Christmas together two years ago I filled it with cigarettes and then put it back into my tunic pocket and fastened it. Then I thought my god was it really only Christmases before when we had all been so happy and alive what difference there was now to that time.

I was one of the ones who couldn't wait to go to war but I will tell you something if I had know what war was all about the filth hopelessness and futility then I would never have bothered. But then again all my friends had joined up so I could do no less though I must admit there were very few of them left alive now. I hoped George was alright but I could not keep on thinking like this and so I crawled back up and took another look towards the German trenches I could see that some of their troops were stood on the parapet again. Every now and again a machine gun would fire but apart from this it was mostly quite now this was because men were dying all over 'No Man's Land'. Mostly they were dying from their wounds because no one had been able to take care of them or give them aid. But others I knew quiet well were dying from the German machine guns which fired at any sound or movement and this was a terrible thing to behold. At last night began to draw in I spoke to Sam about my plan to retreat back to our lines under the cover of darkness. We talked about sweethearts and other things for awhile and he told me that he had been quite keen in Ivy Tillman but he realised that she was in love with Frank and he understood. I thought she will be mourning Frank now but I didn't say anything then Sam asked. "What went wrong with the attack why didn't we smash through the German lines like they promised?" I didn't bother answering as I thought it was a rhetorical question and I was too hot and bothered to even try and give an explanation he then said. "Oh and by the way congratulations on being made up to Lance Corporal." I thanked him and looked at the fading stripe on my sleeve and wondered if it even meant anything anymore as I had seen nothing more of any of the people who had left the trench and for all I knew they could have been dead. The sun was now beginning to set and the ferocious heat of the day was dying down and I knew that I must now prepare for when darkness fell I had believed at times that today would go on forever a living nightmare but I now knew it was coming to a close. It was now dusk and it looked like the Germans were preparing their evening meal as I watched the smoke from their cooking fires wisping up into the warm evening air.

I told Sam to get ready as night was now setting in fast I told him we would leave everything to the wounded apart from a water bottle apiece a couple of packets of cigarettes and our rifles and ammunition as we needed to travel light and fast. I motioned him to the bottom of the crater and told him we would be going in about half an hour and then very carefully we lit a couple of fags cupping the glowing ends in our hands to hide the tell tale glow from the end of them. About twenty minutes after this it was dark enough to make our move we said goodbye to the rest of the wounded asking if any of them wanted to come with us but we got no takers so we wished them good luck as they did to us. We crawled up to the edge of the crater and then boosted ourselves over the lip and into the grass then we bent double and began to run towards our lines. As we walked on I saw that the whole of 'No Man's Land' had come to life with men throwing shadows a darker hue than the night sky. These were the survivors of the attack this morning trying like us to make it back to our lines and safety. Things went excellent at the start and I was very sure that we would make it without mishap or at least that's what I prayed. Then the flares started to arc into the night sky bathing the scene in white light and I could now see just how many men were trying to get back to our trenches. The only problem with this was so could the Germans who started spraying the whole of the area in front of them with machine gun fire I yelled to Sam to get down and we both fell to the floor and pressed ourselves into the ground waiting for the flares to go out and the firing to stop and praying it wouldn't hit us.

The machine gun bullets passed beyond us and I heard a scream as one of the dark shadows fell down after being hit. I shouted to Sam "We are going to get up in a moment when the flares die down and make a run for that shell hole twenty yards to our front." Sam replied. "I'm scared Billy Boy I don't think that I can get up I really don't want to rick getting shot trying." I couldn't really blame him and to tell the truth I didn't really want to risk it myself but I knew that we had to or we would perish. I said. "Listen Sam we can't stay here I'm as scared as you are but as soon as the last flare goes out we go alright?" I could see the tears on his cheeks but I will give him his due he replied. "Alright if you say we have to then I'm with you", I thanked him. Then as soon as the last flare went out we moved and made our way as fast as we could to the nearest shell hole.

However we were tripping overt things now but I couldn't see what they were in the dark but another flare shot up into the air bathing the ground in its light. That was when I saw was on the ground it was the equipment the troops had been carrying in this mornings attack that had been dropped or abandoned. We had been tripping up over the shit that they had made us carry like angle iron stakes, spiral stakes as well as water cans that were empty and had probably been riddled by bullets. Wicker pigeon baskets smashed up their occupants having either flown away or who were lying dead in a mass of bloody feathers on the earth. Then of course we were falling over the corpses of our dead comrades who were lying all over the place where they had fallen.

I shouted at Sam. "Quick run for cover", as I heard the German machine guns start up with their symphony of death again. We ran but we had to be careful we did not trip up over anything so we could not run that fast but we managed to get to the shell hole whilst the Germans were busy killing others. We jumped in and slid down the craters wall to the bottom it was then in the light from the flare that I saw Bert led there I scrambled over to him as I heard him say. "Who's that you couldn't help me mate could you I have been shot in the guts and it don't half hurt?" I replied. "Take it easy Bert it is only me Billy Boy so don't worry I will help you", and I mover over to where he could see me more clearly. He said. "Thank god it's you Billy Boy I have been led here for what seems like ever and I'm drier than a camel's ball bag." I waited till another flare went off then looked at his wound and what I saw filled me with fear I knew that although the hole in his stomach was only small the one at the back would be massive and the pain must have been excruciating. I bandaged him as best I could with field dressings and gave him the last of the morphine tablets I had taken from the dead Lieutenant. Then I said to him. "Look who I found on my travels mate its Sam Brown you remember Sam from the 2nd Battalion. Bert talked to him saying. "Hello Sam I hope you are in better fettle then me son?" Sam told him he was alright but I don't think he heard him as he seemed to have slipped into unconsciousness and he didn't move again and I became quite worried for him. I checked Bert out and I was glad to find out that he was still breathing we had moved Bert up and we left him lying on the side of the crater while Sam and I moved to the bottom where I took out my cigarette case out and offered him one. He took one and so did I and we lit it in while the flare bathed us in tits light it was one of the most satisfying things I have ever had and it calmed my nerves no end.

There were a group of men on the opposite side of the hole but I couldn't see who they were because they were in shadow and I shouted. "Would you like a smoke lads we have a few on us and your quite welcome to a couple if you want?" There was no answer and my offer was met with silence so Sam shouted. "You ungrateful shits we offer you our last smokes and you ignore us well just piss off then." I grabbed his arm and said. "Its no use shouting at them Sam or offering them anything because they have no use for anything anymore Sam started trembling and sobbing and believe you me I wasn't far off myself. Because the six blokes on that side of the hole were all dead I saw this in the light of another flare that had gone up close to their side. Judging by their positions I would have said that they had been killed by blast that's why they were lying so naturally. The flare died out and I heard Sam's breathe hiss out and then he gulped loudly through sobbing. I couldn't leave him like this so I moved towards him and took his arm intending to shake him out of it. He wrenched his arm away from me as though I carried the plague and screamed at me. "Get away this is your entire fault I should never have listened to you I could have stayed safe and been took prisoner if I had stayed in my old position." He laughed and it was such a demented sound that I feared for his sanity and then he screamed and a long gurgle came from his throat and he rolled onto his side. The next set of large artillery flares went off overhead and I moved over to where he was curled up into a foetal position with his knees drawn up to his chin he was keening quietly in his throat and I touched his shoulder but he flinched like a whipped cur.

I knelt down on front of him and put my head opposite his on the shell hole side so that I was level with his eyes. I flicked on my lighter and used the light from it to look into his eyes I saw they were completely blank no recognition of me or where he was in fact they were like bottomless

pits staring into nowhere. He had gone into some kind of mental shock by the look of it and that meant he was no good to me nor anyone else. So I took stock of the situation and it wasn't good not only had I Bert to look after but Sam as well now and I thought bloody hell I'm nearly mad myself with all that had happened today. I was worn out and at the end of my tether and I hadn't a clue what I was going to do next but I knew one thing we would have to stay here tonight and probably all tomorrow as well. I would have to see what happened I knew that we were not all that far from our lines really but it was death out there and even if I went back by myself no one would come back out for Sam and Bert and they wouldn't let me come back. I owed it to them to stay with them and sort something out that would get all three of us safely back home to our trenches and that's what I was going to do. The night went on the same with flares illuminating the landscape and the machine guns rattling away at anything that moved or made a noise out in the open. Bert was still unconscious and Sam was still led on his side keening and living in his own world. I sat at the bottom of the crater smoking incessantly and wondering what we were going to do next. In the light of the Flares I moved over to where the corpses lay I was right it was blast that had killed them all that looked different was that their faces looked a bit squashed in. I searched their bodies but someone had beaten me to it and they had no water bottles or anything else left on them. I now knew that my first priority must be to get water because once the sun came up tomorrow it would be scorching again and the lads and I would be in big trouble. I knew also that I would have to go on a scavenger hunt to get what we needed I certainly didn't want to but I knew that I must. I nearly screamed at the pair of them why me was I not allowed a rest why did I always have to go out on a limb and risk my life? I started sobbing and I found it hard to stop everything that had happened in the last two years suddenly closed in on me and I thought that I would go mad.

The thing was they were friends and comrades and that is why I knew that I would risk my life for them if for no other reason. It was now just becoming first light when you can first perceive night's shadows and outlines and begin to interpret what they are. I left the pair of them there in the crater both locked in their own worlds and they never even knew that I had gone. I slipped over the edge of the crater into my world the real one of slaughter and death as I belly crawled through the grass towards the next shell hole. All the time I was looking over my shoulder towards the German lines and waiting for the stuttico fire of the machine guns to reach me as they spotted me. I realised though that they had bigger fish to fry and were now stood to expecting another attack to begin living on their nerves. I pulled myself into the shell hole and heard someone say. "Who's there are you one of us if you are could you spare fag mate?" I looked over and in the growing light I could see that it was three people who I knew there was Mickey Jones, Fred Hargreaves and Lt Johnny Pearson. I said. "Hello you three what brings you out to a charming holiday resort like this then?" Mickey replied. "Bloody hell is that really you Billy Boy hell you're a sight for sore eyes man and no mistake." I moved over to them Lt Pearson was propped up against the craters side and I could see the field dressing that had been bandaged round his chest where he was wounded. The last time I had seen him he had been bent over Arthur Tilley yesterday morning in the first wave trying to help him. He smiled at me though I could see that this caused him pain and it was more like a grimace as he said. "Hello Billy Boy I'm glad to see you've survived its nice to know that there are some of the old hands still alive", I saw the grimace appear on his face again and I asked. "Are you in a great deal of pain Johnny is there nothing you've got for it?" He shook his head sadly and his face twisted again in agony. I reached into my pocket for the morphia tablets I had there but then I remembered that I had given Bert the last one Instead I handed the fags around and lit them I then said. "I'm sorry but I have no water to give you in fact I'm out looking for some now." Fred Hargreaves answered. "That's alright we have plenty of water here", and he pointed to a water can over the far side. He continued saying. "It's nearly full and there's another full one behind it", I thanked god for this small mercy and for keeping his watch over me.

Then Lt Johnny Pearson said. "What have you been up to since we kicked off yesterday have you seen any of the other Officers or men?" I started to tell my tale from the start of the attack right up to Bert and Sam being in the next foxhole behind this one. Johnny once again spoke to me

asking. "What about the Colonel and RSM have you not seen them again?" I replied. "No I'm afraid not Sir the last time I saw them was when they said goodbye and they went over the top while we gave them covering fire." He looked pensive and said. "God I hoped they made it back to our lines I was going to say to look after the Battalion but from what we know there is not much of it left to look after." Mickey Jones joined in saying. "It was all the kit we were carrying and the no running order and the fucking barrage the wire wasn't even touched butchers that what them lot are fucking butchers", and his voice trailed off. Lt Pearson replied. "That's enough Jones it will do no good to keep hashing over what's happened we must now concentrate on trying to get back to our lines." I said to him. "Speaking of that Sir I will fill these water bottles from the can and then I will have to get back to Bert and Sam." He looked at me and I could see the doubt in his eyes and he tried to sit more upright saying. "It will be no picnic getting back to that shell hole now even if it is behind us in fact it will not be safe at all listen?" I heard the German machine guns and artillery open up for the second day running the sun was up now and it was getting warm in the crater. I had been lulled into a false sense of security talking to my friends I should have kept my guard up and got out of here while I could. The quiet and the birds singing mixed with the feeling of relative safety as well as being able to talk to someone had got me acting as though the battle was over. But this was a mute point now as the German artillery smashed the silence and any feeling of safety that I may have had. Though I did understand what Lt Pearson had told me and I knew just how hard it would be getting back to the lads but I would still have to do it so I said. "I will wait for the artillery strafe to pass by and then I will make a dash for it because whatever happens I must try to get back to the shell hole.

There was a moments silence and then Lt Johnny Pearson replied. "I understand your concern for the lads particularly Bert and it does you credit but you getting killed will not help them so think on before you charge out of here." I understood this but I had promised the lads I would return with water and I knew what kind of condition they would be in if I didn't. Johnny Pearson had closed his eyes and I reckoned he had slipped into unconsciousness so I took the water bottles and filled them from the can. Fred Hargreaves eyed me saying. "So your going then Billy Boy your mad why don't you just stop here where it's safe with us for a bit?" I replied. "Thanks Fred but I have promised the lads I will return and look after them and that's what I'm going to do." He said. "Well it's your neck lad all I can do is wish you good luck." I thought it's nice to have friends like these in the middle of adversity friends who were more bothered about your wellbeing than their own. I turned again to Fred and Mickey and said. "Listen when Lt Pearson wakes up just say to him that I have gone back with the water for Bert and Sam but I will be back over tonight I will need a hand with those two and we will all be together ready to break out for our lines if it is safe." Mickey smiled saying. "I will give you a hand tonight with the lads I will be glad of something to do." Fred said. "Count on me as well it will be better if we have everyone together before we try for home."

I thanked them and then waited for the artillery strafe to pass over the top of us as it did I slipped over the lip of the crater the last thing I heard was Mickey and Fred wishing me good luck and god speed. I crawled through the grass and then I had to hug the earth as a machine gun fire over the top of me it passed on but I still led there. I could hear shells exploding again as the strafe started up again and then I could see Fred from the crater shooing me on my way so I lifted my hand towards him in salute. Then I literally pissed my pants because one minute I was saluting Fred and he was signalling for me to get a move on and the next second Fred, Mickey and Lt Johnny Pearson had disappeared. There was a massive explosion as a Howitzer shell fell in the crater earth bits if my friends and a lot of smoke and flames shot up into the sky. Then it all rained back down on the ground some of it fell on me and I received a bang to the back of my head. I was a bit groggy and something was laying across my neck I grabbed hold of it thinking it was a piece of wood. But how I wished it was a piece of wood instead it was Johnny Pearson's left arm which had been ripped off by the blast. I threw it as far away from me as I could and I very nearly lost my mind like poor Sam. I threw up down myself where I lay and I shook like a whipped cur tremors running through my body making me tremble. The horror was nearly too much for me but I knew that I must get back and so I crawled on through my own vomit with my heart as heavy as lead and tears clouding my vision. I

rolled down into our shell hole at last and never looked back I checked on my charges they were what mattered now. There was no change in either of them and I rigged uniform shelters to protect them from the sun. Greif for my friend's deaths was overwhelming me and a black mist was forming before my eyes and I knew that I would carry the moment of their deaths with me for the rest of my life. I spent the next few hours not knowing where I was smoking my head off and doing nothing in particular it was as though I was in a trance.

It was mid-afternoon when I eventually snapped out of my malaise and started to plan for what I would do tonight I really needed to work out a strategy. We didn't have many yards to go and I would have to boost Bert up onto my back and carry him. Sam was now sat up and had stopped his keening now he looked out of blank eyes staring into space but I wasn't that worried. He did everything I told him automatically I told him to open his mouth and I gave him some water which he swallowed. But he only did this from memory or so it seemed and he neither acknowledged what he was doing or that I was even present. He then just sat there staring into space I wracked my brains for an answer of what to do with him. I couldn't hold his hand if I was carrying Bert and there was no way that I could let him try it by himself because he would probably wander off towards the German trenches instead of ours. I lit another fag and then suddenly it came to me I stripped a rifle sling off one of the rifles I would fasten one end of this to Sam's wrist and then lead him behind me like a child. I hoped that this would work the afternoon wore on so slow at times that I thought that time was actually standing still. Then I saw Bert move and I went quickly to his side and asked. "How are you feeling mate?" He looked at me and tried to smile as I gave him a drop of water to wet his lips and I could see the pleasure that this gave him. He replied. "Ah that was good I don't feel to bad there is no pain now", this caused me to worry I was glad he had no pain but he really should have done. Instead I said. "What happened to you Bert and the bloke that was with you?" He seemed to sigh and I wet my hanky and wiped his forehead as he replied. "Well we made good progress at first and then Sid got caught by some German machine gun fire and fell into a shell hole I made him comfortable and bound his wounds but we were out of water so I went for some." He shivered a bit and coughed and I watched as the blood ran down his chin I mopped it off as he continued. "Anyway I found some and came back there were other dead in the trench and as I rolled over the top I thought thank god because there were a couple of stretcher bearers there. At first I thought they were helping Sid and checking the others but then I saw they were going through their pockets and taking rings and watches off them."

Bert stopped talking for a moment and I told him to rest and not say anything else but he went on. "I challenged them saying what the fuck are you doing and then when they turned round I saw that it was that little shite Stanley and Tommy Smith I had left my rifle in the crater when I went and these two both fired at the same time and I took a bullet in the gut and one in the chest. They didn't hang around after that and scarpered elsewhere I knew that I was badly hit I crawled over to Sid but he was dead whether they did it or not I don't know anyway I have been here ever since." I was mortified and so fucking angry that I could hardly talk but I said. "Right Bert when we get back you have to report this and we will get the bastards shot for what they have done." Bert smiled at me and shook his head saying. "I won't be going back with you Billy Boy I want you to promise me you will look after Mabel and that you will tell her that I died a fine death." I replied. "You will be alright Bert I'm going to get you and Sam back so don't worry", there were tears in my eyes now as he said. "I'm afraid not mate I'm so glad to have been friends with you I'm just sorry that I will never marry my Mabel now so George was right after all. Promise me that you will take care of those corpse robbing shits and that you will be careful." I sat by Bert's side and he was silent now I told him he was a good friend and that Mabel would be taken care of and then I heard him sigh he sat forward and then I heard him say Mabel and he fell back. His eyes stared out and I knew that my friend was no more I also knew that there would be no trial for Smith and Stanley I would be the judge jury and executioner. Once more I smoked incessantly as I sat beside Bert's body I had covered his face with the jacket I had used as a shade I drank some water and waited as the sun began to hang low in the

sky as it began to set. I would start making my preparations I would first take Sam back to our lines and then I would set off to find Smith and Stanley and to kill them.

I grabbed Sam said farewell to Bert and then pushing him up we slipped over the lip of the crater we had to press on before the evening strafe began and the illumination flares lit up the evening. I put the sling onto Sam's wrist now and grabbed the other end then we set off Sam following me secured by his tether and I watched as other shapes began to stand up and make their way to our trenches. Just as I thought things were going really well a flare burst into life and flooded the ground in bright white light throwing everyone into base relief. The flare highlighted us and I felt my soul quiver with fear as I knew what was coming I began to run but I had forgotten about Sam who held me back. Then I heard and watched as the bullets scythed through the grass coming towards us I dropped to the floor and tugged on the tether pulling Sam down as well as the bullets went over us. I waited till the flare had burned out and then crawled over to where Sam lay I shook him but there was no movement I thought he might have been knocked out and it wasn't till another flare shot up that I saw the small dark patches that were stitches across his back. I felt them and my hand came away sticky with blood a machine gunner must have seen me and I had to hide behind Sam's body as he opened up sending bursts my way. Sam's body shook and I could hear the bullets striking it with dull thuds I thought I had gotten away with it but then I felt a burning sensation across my thigh as a bullet dug a furrow through it. The flare went out and I managed to roll into a small hollow I felt for the wound and then wrapped a field dressing round it I watched and saw that I was close to our wire. Then I saw the stretcher bearers begin to crawl out to collect the wounds and I knew that Smith and Stanley would be amongst them and I decided that I would take care of them now before they robbed anymore corpses.

I traversed across 'No Man's Land' Stopping to look at each stretcher bearer as I came upon them some I knew and they told me to make my way back to our lines. But I had more important things on my mind like settling up with the two bastards that had killed Bert. I kept on running into small groups of men and individuals trying to get back to our lines and every time I bumped into someone I knew I would ask them if they had seen Stanley or Smith. However no one seemed to have seen them although a Sgt from one of the stretcher bearing teams said they were out here somewhere but that they would be up to no good. I kept on going until I came to a quiet part of the battlefield and there I was rewarded I looked through my sight as a flare shot up in the distance and I saw the two of them bending down and relieving corpses of their belongings and shoving them in small packs. I took careful aim on Tommy Smith's head and squeezed the trigger I watched as he pitched forward into a shell hole I watched Stanley freeze for an instant as I worked the bolt and shoved another round into the breech. I fired but he was already diving for the hole but I saw him grab his chest as he disappeared. I was pretty confident that I had killed him as well as Smith and I was feeling both exhilarated and intoxicated I needed no more vindication for the execution I had carried out then what had been done to Rosie and Bert. I walked over to the hole and my state of mind had now left me off guard and not thinking clearly or I would never have walked straight up to where the two bastards had fallen without taking care and displaying some caution. As I looked down into the small shell scrape I saw Tommy Smith led there he had twisted when he fell and I could see the big hole in the back of his head where the skull had been punched out spreading brain matter and blood down the back of his jacket. I turned towards Stanley just in time to realise my mistake and that was he wasn't dead he had raised his rifle and fired I pulled my trigger instinctively. I never saw the shot that killed Stanley because his one had hit an angle iron and ricocheting hitting me in the temple and gouging a furrow. I can remember nothing else at all about what happened to me after this and I had no idea while later that I was found behind our lines the next time I came to I was in a convent just outside Querrieu being looked after by some nurses. The convent was packed with wounded but my thigh and the shrapnel in my hand had been dressed and I had a bandage on my head. I was put in a ward in the convent whilst the more seriously wounded were loaded onto hospital trains for shipping back to Britain.

PART SIX

SHOT JULY 3rd 1916 - JULY 20th 1916

Chapter Twenty

I came to again in the ward with some other wounded blokes from different units I looked and saw sat beside my bed a Lieutenant that I didn't know but he was from my Regiment. He said. "How are you feeling Corporal Lamb?" I looked cautiously at him wondering who he was but I replied. "Non to bad Sir my legs a bit sore and my head hurts but other than that I'm in the pink." He coughed then said. "Let me introduce myself I'm Lieutenant Howarth of the 2nd Battalion and I need to ask if you are up to answering a few questions if you are I will try not to tire you too much?" I looked at him with the utmost suspicion thinking what is he doing here? But I replied. "If I can help you in any way Sir I will do so fire away." He changed tack and told me. "First of all let me put your mind at rest all these questions are for is to ascertain whether you saw anyone killed and if you did could you identify them?" He took his hanky out again and blew his nose before he continued. "You see the problem is Corporal that so many men were killed from your Battalion in the first attack and there are so many still missing that we are trying to build up a record of who's who. So I began by telling him. "I saw Corporal Frank Lord go down right at the start I don't know if he is dead but Pte Nobby Clarke definitely is, the same goes for Bert Hall, Sam Brown, Fred Hargreaves, Mickey Jones, Dusty Miller, S/Sgt Ted Wallace, Lieutenant Johnny Pearson and Major Melstone." The Lieutenant shied a bit swallowed and looking up from his notebook said. "Are you sure about Major Melstone?" I thought what a fucking prick so I replied. "Oh yes Sir I'm sure the only thing left of Major Melstone was a few scraps of flesh some pulped bone and blood and a few strips of smouldering uniform which on one piece still had his rank badge." I took a drink of water as I was so dry but I thought I will teach you as I saw the Lieutenants face turn white as a sheet at this news I continued. "S/Sgt Wallace Sir well I watched him die there was nothing I could do for him he had lost both his legs and an arm blown off by the same shell that had obliterated the Major he S/Sgt Wallace died from loss of blood and severe shock Sir", the Lieutenant looked as though he was going to be sick.

I was really mad at him now for making me remember all this and I said. "The next ones I saw die Sir were Lt John Pearson, Pte Fred Hargreaves and Pte Mickey Jones and before you ask there were only teeth and gore left of them by the time the howitzer shell had finished with them." He looked quite ill and I don't think he was cut out to be a soldier but he stuck to his task as he asked. "Is that everyone you can identify or are there more?" I replied. "There are lots but I don't know their names apart from Pte Sam Brown who was killed as we got close to home." Lt Howarth then asked me. "Did you see Colonel Terry or RSM Greaves killed?" I told him. "No I didn't see them again once they left the German front line trench we had to abandon." He asked. "So you never came across them in a shell hole or in 'No Man's Land' or anywhere else?" I replied. "No like I say I never saw them again once they went and I didn't bump into them either." He stood up and held out his hand which I shook as he said. "Thank you very much L/Cpl Lamb for the information you have supplied I hope you get better quickly goodbye." He put his notebook away and walked out of the ward without a backward glance but as he was going I had a very bad feeling in my gut that all was not right. I had been in the hospital a few days now and I was rather worried because I had received

no mail from Helen and for some reason I was not allowed to send any I thought it might have been because of the battle. There had been no more visitors either and tears ran down my cheeks as I felt frightened and alone. But I think this had more to do with the realization that nearly all my friends were dead than on any self pity on my part. The doctor came to see me and he was very pleased by my progress as he said. "We were a bit worried at first what with your head wound and the thigh one was a bit nasty but it looks good now." I asked. Why were you worried about the head wound Sir after all it was only a gouge?" He replied. "Well it was because you were found a long way behind the lines with no equipment and you collapsed when questioned." It was the first I had heard about this and I told him I didn't remember, he told me not to worry as this could be quite normal with a head wound. He went off quite happy with his diagnosis and his explanation but I was chomping at the bit to find out exactly what had happened the last thing I remembered was pulling the trigger and shooting Stanley.

The next day I was moved into a side room and I thought my god things are looking up the next thing you knew they would be giving me a civic reception. My little nurse Violet came in and I sensed something wasn't right because I could see such pity in her eyes that it left me dumbfounded for awhile. I could only think that the doctor's had made a serious mistake about my diagnosis and that I must be dying and Violets face was only making things worse. In fact as she ran out of my room with tears streaking her face I felt like I might expire on the spot. But these feelings were nothing to what I felt a moment later when my door opened and a Provost Major a Captain and Lieutenant Howarth walked into my room. As I looked through the open door I could see a Military Policeman stood on guard and my heart sank lower than my boot straps. Lt Howarth introduced the others saying. "Cpl Lamb this is Major Vine from the Provost's Office and this is Captain Berryman from Brigade HQ." I looked at them and I can quite honestly say that I was anxious I wasn't right sure what they wanted but I knew that it did not bode well for me. Before I could ask anything Major Vine jumped straight in as he said. "Cpl Lamb you are being charged with cowardice in the face of the enemy and deserting your post in time of war you will be summarily Court Marshalled. Well I will tell you something my heart skipped a beat or two and the room swum hazily and for the first time in my life I thought I might faint. I couldn't believe what I was hearing and I knew that in a moment I would wake up from this night mare and everything would be all right. But it wasn't a dream as I knew when the Brigade Captain said. "You are charged that on the 1st of July 1916 you did flee your post thereby losing a vital position to the enemy and the deaths of undetermined amounts of your comrades. This amounts to cowardice in the face of the enemy and should you be found guilty the sentence of the court will be death, my mouth was open wide in denial but I was at a loss for words. I thought this shower of shit must be joking bloody hell it was me and Ted Wallace that allowed the last of our lot to escape instead of being slaughtered there and when these idiots recognised that I recon I will be owed an apology.

The Captain continued. "The trial date is set for July 15th and Lt Howarth here will be your defence advocate the Court Martial will be held at Divisional HQ Querrieu. The Captain and the Major had finished and stood up to leave but before they did the Major turned and said to me. "There can be no more heinous crime in my book Cpl Lamb than a man who runs from the enemy and leaves his comrades to die." I tried to protest my innocence and tell them that a mistake had been made but they had left the room before the words formed on my lips. This left me alone with the Lieutenant who I must say did not fill me with confidence so I said to him. "What the fucking hell is going on Sir one minute I'm telling you of the people I saw die and the next these trumped up charges are left at my door is this some kind of fucking joke?" He looked at me very seriously as he replied. "This is not a joke and things don't look very good for you at the moment in fact they are looking downright bleak." I thought that's right fill me with confidence you fucking posh idiot and then I realised that he was my defence council and knew I was doomed and I very nearly laughed out loud. He continued saying. "We are in a bit of a bind to ay the least but before I recount what has gone on and why you are in this situation tell me what happened in the German front line trench that morning. So I told him about the German strafing and the counter attacks he was staging of the fact

that no troops came to relieve us and the untenable position we found ourselves in. How Colonel Terry had said we should retreat back to our own lines and how me and Ted Wallace had stayed behind to cover the retreat only making it out ourselves by the skin of our teeth. I led back exhausted and my head thumped from the pain like a blacksmiths anvil being struck. I heard Lt Howarth say. "Listen Corporal this is very important is there anyone you can think of who can corroborate your story I mean anyone at all?" I replied. "Of course there is Sir all you have to do is ask", he stopped me a moment while he got his notebook out and then smiled a satisfied smile. He then said. "Right Corporal just give me the names in your own time and I will see that this nonsense is put to bed were it belongs." So I told him. "I'm surprised Sir all you have to do is ask Colonel Terry or RSM Greaves and I'm sure that they will confirm everything that I have told you."

I looked at him and noticed that he wasn't writing anything down and the feeling of dread washed over me again as I asked him. "What's wrong Sir surely they will confirm what happened after all they gave the order?" His face was miserable as he replied. "We cant ask them anything Colonel Terry and the RSM were killed trying to get back to our lines that means you are the only one living who was in that trench and knows what happened." I thought to myself bloody hell if soldiers as good as Colonel Terry and RSM Greaves had been killed then the Battalion must have ceased to exist to all intents and purposes. There were tears in my eyes now as I thought of all the good friends and comrades I had lost and I thought what a waste what a terrible waste of good men. Lt Howarth continued saying. "Can you think of no one else who heard the order given no one at all?" I wracked my brain but the Colonel and RSM had been my last hope and with them dead and me left alive it was only my word that the Colonel did order us to retreat that made me feel so alone like the last person on earth. The Lieutenant then said. "Of course it wouldn't be so bad if they didn't have witnesses against you." So I asked. "What witnesses there are none left I'm the last one alive who was in the trench?" Lieutenant Howarth looked sadly at me saying. "There are stretcher bearers who were out in no man's land saying you were looking for a L/Cpl Stanley and a Pte Smith and acting strange about it. Their bodies were found later as you staggered away from the shell scrape they were in the prosecution is saying that you shot them because they knew you had left your post." I told him. "That's not true Sir those bastards had been robbing the dead robbing our fucking lads Sir I just shot them out of hand as they deserved." The Lieutenant replied. "Can you prove that they were robbing the dead in fact can you prove anything at all against them because if you can't then I don't think we should fetch it up that you shot them." I looked over at him and knew he was right the possessions they had stolen would be long gone and I couldn't prove that they had been robbing anyone or that they had shot Bert. In fact the prosecution would probably accuse me of killing Bert saying that he was going to tell that I had run away and I thought to myself I'm in deep shit here. At the end of the day Ted Wallace and the rest would have backed me up but he was dead in a hole out front so when it came down to it I had no evidence and no witnesses.

I carried on thinking to myself Rosie had been right in a way Smith had done for me or rather Smith and his mate Stanley if only I could remember what had happened after I had pulled the trigger but I couldn't. Lt Howarth spoke saying. "Well we must prepare for the Courts Martial and put some kind of defence together but what that is going to be I don't know yet the thing is at the moment your looking at the death penalty make no mistake about that." I thought to myself don't be such a cheerful Charlie and I was so mad I could hardly speak as he continued. "I will try to find some witnesses but things look pretty hopeless I will also see if I can get some people to give you a testimonial as to you conduct and what kind of soldier you have been so I had better be on my way as we haven't long left", saying this he stood up and left to find his witnesses. Me I wished him well but I could have told him he was wasting his time for when the Colonel and the others died I died as well. I doubted therefore that he would find anyone I was the last man left alive that stormed the German front line trench and most of my character witnesses would be either dead or seriously wounded. When I was a lone my thoughts turned to Helen my love and my heart ached for just one sweet word from her but I had received no letters for s couple of weeks. Now that I was probably facing death here I wrote to her explaining everything that had happened and asked her to pray for

me. I told her not to worry and that if the worse should happen not to believe all she heard and to remember that I loved her and only her. I asked her to say nothing to Rosie it could do no good and if my death came then to tell her I had been killed in battle. I finished it off asking god to watch over her and telling her she would always be in my thoughts till we met again. I went back to thinking there where it had all gone wrong I suppose it is what people call fate, well I say fuck fate I needed someone to help me out of this mess and then it came to me CSM Dombly he would help me after all we were like family I hadn't seen him since the first day but I knew in my bones that he would not have been killed. I cheered up quite a bit after this as I knew that if anyone could see away through this mess it would be him and no mistake.

Lieutenant Howarth came back to see me the next day and I told him to go and see the CSM and that he would find away to get me out of the shit. His face took on the look of a constipated bloodhound and he stuttered. "I'm afraid that wont be possible CSM Dombly was seriously injured on the first day and has been shipped back home the doctors are not even sure that he will make it." I remembered the old adage 'kick a man when he's down', well not only had I been kicked but bloody trampled on with pit-boots. Of course I felt sorry for Bill Dombly he had been a father figure to me and was part of the only family I had left so I hoped he would get better and survive. The Lieutenant continued saying. "So I'm very much afraid Corporal that the CSM is out of the question and he can give you no help whatsoever. My heart sank into my boots and inside I was heartily sick of everything that had happened apart from that is killing Stanley and Smith. He went on and said. "Well there is one thing you are lucky to have someone representing you at the trial it is only because Colonel Jack Harmon made a thorough bloody nuisance of himself at Division that I was assigned to you." I thought to myself is this bloke a fucking idiot or what he considers it lucky to have him when I m facing a capital charge with no witnesses to stand up for me. Not only this there was every chance the court would find me guilty and I would be stood against a wall and shot. I would certainly not like to see what he called unlucky and with a clown like him defending me I could feel the bullets striking home already. "He turned saying well I better be off and se if I can find any more witnesses, oh by the way did I tell you that I found two character witnesses S/Sgt George Drew and Sgt Tommy Macey." My heart soared just too know that at least two of my friends were alive and well and were willing to bat for me and show me they cared.

Lt Howarth started to leave and then turned round saying. "Try not to let all this get you down too much hopefully I can find someone else who can help", and with this parting comment he left. I laughed out loud was this bloke a bloody Looney I mean try not to fucking worry I would have liked to see him stay cheerful in the same position. Mind you nothing could dampen my spirit just knowing that Gorge and Tommy were alive was a tonic in itself and I knew that they would fight tooth and nail to clear my name and have me freed. The following morning Lt Howarth and Major Vine came to my room to tell me that my Court Martial had been scheduled for 10:00hrs the next morning. The Major then told me what would happen and explained the procedure before he got up and left saying he would see us tomorrow then there were just the two of us I said. "Is it possible to see either George Drew or Tommy Macey before tomorrow Sir?" He replied. "No I'm sorry Corporal the Provost would never allow it them being witnesses and all." This was another set back for me and I would have liked to see the lads for a chat but I wasn't going to let the news get me down. He turned to me saying. "I will try to fix up a visit after the trial if it is necessary which I'm hoping it won't be", he left after saying this leaving me alone to wonder yet again what had gone wrong. I slept in fits and starts but it wasn't just the nightmares which had returned it was berating myself and I was so mad I could have killed someone there and then. Finally Violet the nurse came in and gave me my medication she told me a fresh uniform had been laid out on the chair for me and that she would help me get dressed when the time came. I thanked her and a short time later I had my breakfast then Violet came and helped me dress. I was now ready and two Military Policemen pushed me in a wheel chair to a waiting ambulance outside that would take me to Division HQ which was a t Querrieu which was also the HQ for the 4th Army. All the brass would be there so we

would be in good company mind you a bet there was a flap on now. I had heard that the offensive was not going well at all the attacks had started again but our lads were still getting nowhere.

I was wheeled into Divisional HQ and we waited outside a room that had been given over for Courts Martial as we arrived I saw another chap going in then ten minutes later he was back out ashen faced having been tried and sentenced to death. I thought fucking hell this lot aren't hanging about much and I didn't fancy my chances if all you were getting was ten minutes. Lt Howarth was white faced himself and I thought I think he just realises that this was a life and death situation. Then my turn came and I tried to tighten up the old sphincter muscles but I don't think it worked. The two Military Policemen wheeled me into the room and I could see a Colonel and two Majors sat behind a table looking at us as we came in I noticed Major Vine off to one side and Captain Berryman was leafing through some papers. The Colonel cleared his throat and everything in the room went quite and I must admit that he looked a crusty old bugger to say the least. Captain Berryman spoke saying. "The next case Sir is brought against L/Cpl Lamb W. he is charged with deserting his post in time of war and cowardice in the face of the enemy." The Colonel looked at me with a glare and asked. "How do you plead to the charges brought against you?" Before I could answer Lt Howarth replied. "He pleads not guilty Sir on both counts", the Lieutenant looked quite pleased with himself. The Colonel was not impressed though and asked. "Who the bloody hell are you Lieutenant and what are you doing at these proceedings?" Lt Howarth looked quite taken aback as he answered the question. "I am Lt Howarth Sir and I am representing the accused it has been cleared by Division." The Colonel laughed like a hyena and spoke to the two Majors then He said. "Very well you may stay for now but try not to interrupt" and he nodded at Captain Berryman to continue he said. "The accused is charged with leaving his assigned post on the afternoon of July 1st 1916 and allowing the enemy to recapture a front line trench that had been taken at great cost of life that morning." The Captain paused for affect before he went on. "This caused a number of his comrades to be killed but not content by the travesty he then saved his own skin and ran leaving his comrades to fight on this Sir is cowardice in the face of the enemy and must be punished by the correct sentence which is death." The Colonel looked at me again but I wasn't bothered anymore I could sense that for me the game was up just by looking at the Officers at the table.

Captain Berryman took out his hanky and mopped his brow before he continued saying. "There are some witness statements in front of you Sir from different witnesses. The three Officers skimmed through the statements and I could see their eyebrows lifting. He went on. "The accused has no one to verify his story that that he was covering the other troops so they could retreat. If he was how come only he survived then while the men he claimed to have so heroically covered all died?" The Colonel said. "He was found behind our lines quite away from the front and was injured what about that Captain?" The prosecutor replied. "You have seen from the statements Sir that he was acting suspiciously in 'No Man's Land' we submit that he was wounded when looking for these other two men Pte Smith and L/Cpl Stanley. We think that they may have known something about his desertion and that he was trying to silence them whatever happened they are dead Sir and Corporal Lamb is still alive." Lt Howarth now jumped in risking the courts wrath. "Sir there is evidence that these two men were killed by bullets from a German rifle and not one of our calibres." The Colonel replied. "Yes, yes Lt Howarth but that has nothing to do with it he is not charged with killing anyone now is he?" Captain Berryman continued saying. "Sir it is our contention that L/Cpl Lamb ran from the enemy and that when he was skulking around the front he picked up a couple of injuries and tried to get out of the fighting by getting as far way from the front line as possible that is the prosecutions case Sir." The Colonel replied. "Looking at the evidence it seems like an open and shut case to me and I don't see any reason to prolong the verdict", he looked to his two Majors who nodded their agreement. Then he said. "Oh yes just one minute have you anything to say in mitigation Corporal Lamb?" Again before I could answer Lt Howarth leapt in saying. "Sir may I just say that Corporal Lamb here joined up under age and that he is still under age being only seventeen and that he was also made up in rank for bravery in the field."

He went to go on but the Colonel stopped him as he said. "That will be all Lt Howarth do you know how many more cases we have to get through today, well you probably don't but it's a hell of a lot and we must keep things rolling smoothly along. The Lieutenant wasn't cowed by this as he replied. "I have a couple of witnesses Sir who can", he was cut off in mid sentence by the Colonel who said. "Witnesses well why didn't you say something if they were there when this took place then they can throw some light on the whole affair who are these men?" Lt Howarth replied. "S/Sgt Drew and Sgt Macey Sir I can call them now Sir they are right outside." The Colonel stopped him as he asked. "Just give me a quick timescale of their evidence for instance where they in the trench and did they hear the orders being given?" Lt Howarth was quite red in the face as he replied. "You misunderstood me Sir these are character witnesses I'm afraid they were no where near Corporal Lamb or what happened." The Colonel's face turned puce in colour and a vein started throbbing at his temple and then his voice hissed out. "Are you making fun of this court Lieutenant or are you just a drivelling idiot?" Lt Howarth tried to answer but the Colonel shouted. "I don't give a tinkers cuss about your character witnesses time is pushing on so sit down and be quite." He turned to the two Majors saying. "Right gentlemen shall we consider our verdict in this case?" They didn't even leave the room just looked through some of the papers again had a couple of words together and that was it all cut and dried. The Colonel looking sombre said. "L/Cpl Lamb you have been found guilty on all charges and are here by sentenced to death. Said sentence shall be carried out by firing squad on the 20th of July 1916 subject to confirmation by the Commander in Chief and may god have mercy on you. He told the Military Policemen to take me out but I wasn't really listening anymore as the shoved me towards the door in my wheelchair I noticed the Lieutenants face and it was both distraught and mortified. I looked at my watch noting that it had taken exactly fifteen minutes to end my life and brand me a coward.

I could hear the Colonel shouting for the next case and glaring at poor Lt Howarth I was not taken back to the convent but to a small Château that was the Divisional Staffs residence. It was situated in the small village of Saint-Marianne-Angléy just the other side of Querrieu and this is where I would spend my last precious moment of time. I was put into a kind of storeroom come cell it was quite comfy really a large room with a table chairs and bed in it. My leg was getting better and I could now walk if with a bit of a limp I took off my tunic and lowered myself onto the bed thinking I'm really in the shit this time. I really don't think the seriousness and absolute finality of the situation had sunken in yet I must still have been in a case of shock. I looked around the whitewashed room it had bars on the window but no glass in the frames but still that would keep things nice and cool. I shook my head and then the tears started how could I have ended up in a situation like this I had only ever done my duty and look where that had left me. I was sat in my cell writing my last letters and trying to put a brave face on things but it was hard but at least I had settled with Smith and Stanley and that gave me great satisfaction. I wrote a letter to Rosie and to Bill Dobby explaining what had gone on telling them it was not my fault and asking them to believe in me. I saved my last letter for my beloved Helen I would give that to Lt Howarth along with my locket cigarette case and ring he would give these to George Drew to take home and give to her. I was leaning on the windowsill looking out through the bars at the garden bathed in the morning sunlight the smell of summer flowers was really quite pleasant. Then I saw a striking woman with grey hair in a kind of chignon come along leaning on a silver topped cane she stopped close by and I looked taking in her hair which was a lovely silver colour and not grey and her neck and head had more than an aristocratic look to them. Her eyes were the most striking shade of violet and she was quite tall for a woman and very upright and regal in her poise.

The guard outside my cell said. "Come on you old trout get along with you there is no stopping around here come on Imshee, Imshee", and he shoed at her with his hands. She gave him a look that would have stripped paint and then in perfect English she said. "Who do you think you are talking to I am the Countess de Angély and I own this Château I shall report your behaviour to your superiors be sure of that." The guards face had gone bright red and I could see the sense of doom enter his eyes I nearly laughed out loud as he walked away from us with his tail between his legs.

The countess came over to the window and asked me. "I hope that you are as comfortable as you can be?" I replied. "Thank you Mam but I don't think that I will be here long enough for it to bother me." I saw the light of concern in her eyes that at most times showed an aloofness that was astounding then she continued saying. "I have heard what your fellow countrymen are going to do to you and I think it is a disgrace as well as a sin against god. You are so young 'mes infant' what can be gained by shooting you?" I shrugged my shoulders and thought you countess know sod all about the military or you would know they are a law to themselves. I smiled at her and I was grateful for her concern and just to have someone to talk to then I asked her how the offensive was going? She shook her head and replied. "It is terrible all that slaughter and for what a few yards of ground all you young Englishmen dying here and all the young men from my country dying at Verdun", she could not go on and I saw tears in her eyes. The sentry looked as though he might come over and say something, but one glare from the countess and he shrugged his shoulders and went back to his post. I didn't blame him a bit for she was a very forbidding woman but I could sense underneath that she was also warm and caring. I will tell you something else as well when she was young she must have been absolutely stunning and you could still see the underlying beauty still. We chatted on about this and that for a while longer and I found her to be one of the easiest people that I had ever talked to. She took my mind off my present predicament and for that I can tell you I was very grateful and pretty soon we had told each other a lot about our lives which were so different.

Then she said. "I must go now but I will come back every day until it is time if you wish it I will also get my cook to prepare your meals anything would be better than what you are eating now. I wouldn't disagree with her on that score so I said. "I would like to talk again but I don't think you will be allowed to give me food it's against regulations but I thank you Mam." She replied. "You leave that to me oh and by the way I have not introduced myself properly you may call me Yvette and what is your name?" I told her. "My name is William Lamb but all my friends call me Billy Boy", I could feel my cheeks colouring as I said this. She said to me. "Then it shall be Billy Boy for we are now friends, so till tomorrow Billy Boy adieu", and with these last words she walked away giving the guard a withering look as she passed him. I shook my head and thought what a woman I had never met anyone like her and I had no idea why she would be bothering with a condemned man like me for still I could not help feeling affection for her. After the countess had gone I was at a bit of a loss I sat thinking about how I had been shafted and railroaded through the farce that was my Courts Martial. I just hoped everyone at home was alright but my main concern was Helen I couldn't understand why she hadn't written unless all mail was held up because of the offensive I had to tell myself it was this or I would have gone mad. It was also in quite times like this I got scared of the death I faced on the battlefield you didn't have time to be scared but here and now it seemed to creep over you. I mean what would it be like I knew it was a journey you had to take alone but would the pain be agonising, and would I meet my friends Helen and my parents in the next life? As a Christian I had to believe that I would but god and religion got to be questioned seriously when you saw some of the things that had happened in this war. These questions ran through my head and I could answer none of them I had always been taught to see death as the one great remaining mystery. I was feeling quite low now because there was only me and the cell I was staring at four walls I just hoped that the countess could keep her word and come back but I didn't believe the army would let her.

A short while later Lt Howarth stopped by to see me he had brought some cigarettes and then I saw some mail in his hand and I nearly ran up and snatched it. He laid them on the table but he had kept his hand on top of the letters I though move your fucking hand you dickhead then I can get my letters. I heard him say. "Corporal Lamb we have appealed to the C in C to either have the conviction quashed or the death sentence commuted on account of your age." I shook my head as I replied. "Don't bother Sir there will be no reprieve they need examples to show the troops, basically Sir they need to keep discipline and I'm one of the examples so they will do nothing. He looked a bit shame faced when I said this but he nodded his head in agreement before he continued saying. "Is there anything else I can do for you or get you tell me if there is anything that you want?" I told him. "I would really like to see George Drew and Tommy Macey if that's possible Sir?" He replied. "I

will see what I can do about setting that up hopefully I the next few days”, and having said this he left the room and my precious letters. I rushed forward to the table and grabbed hold of one of the two letters that were on it but it was not from Helen, the writing was spidery and I had never seen it before the other one was a woman’s hand but I didn’t know it either. I tore the first one open and looked at the spidery hand writing that ran down the page I started to read it and saw by the address at the top that it was from Dr Durkin. I read on in it he said that Rosie had been transferred to the infirmary but despite the most arduous efforts she had succumbed to the disease that had afflicted her at 10:15hrs on the date of my Courts Martial. He told me that she had asked for me right up till the end and that Helen, Mabel and Beth had been with her he said she had left a letter which he had enclosed and if there was anything else he could do I should not hesitate to ask. He added his words of sympathy but I didn’t see these as the tears streamed down my cheeks I felt numb and couldn’t really believe it would my nightmare never end?

I wanted to scream Rosie at the top of my voice she was my little sister my second love and I thought that I was going to die there and then and save the firing squad a job. My chest tightened and I couldn’t seem to get my breath I sobbed uncontrollably and snot ran down my nose and bubbled as I cried my heart out but it went unnoticed for the moment. I could not take in what had happened how could my cheerful little golden imp have died before me I was going to die shortly but I would have given my life to save Rosie and I thought that she would have had the time to at least last for a couple more months. I fell asleep and the tears soaked my bolster and the nightmares came back frightening in their intensity and scared the shit out of me the guard woke me and I was trembling in every limb and I had a slitting headache. I really thought that maybe it wasn’t true just a bad dream until I saw the letter with the spidery handwriting on the table then I knew it was right and that my Rosie was dead and the grief held me again in its arms. I got up and grabbed the envelope off the table and then I found another one inside, this was Rosie’s last letter to me that Dr Durkin had enclosed. With a feeling of trepidation I opened it and took out three sheets of paper I saw Rosie’s writing through my tears and remembered it with love and fondness. I said aloud. “Wait for me Rosie darling girl I will not be far behind you now and we will meet up again in the next life.” I started to read the letter in it she put how much she loved both Helen and I and that she had left her money and the money that Ma Moffat had settled on her to the both of us. She said to use it for our future and to be happy I thought oh my love you didn’t have to do that I knew it was of little use to me now but it would take care of Helen. I blessed her memory for this gift as I read on she said she had tried to hold on for my next leave but she was just too weak and it wasn’t to be. Then she exhorted me to be wary of Tommy Smith and not to let him get the better of me. I laughed and told her that I had settled with Smith for what he had done to her and that I now hoped he was rotting in hell.

She finished off by saying that if there was an afterlife then we would all meet up there and that then we three would never be parted again. She also wrote it was a pity that me and her had never been together but she understood my love for Helen that it was perfect and that she loved me even more for this. Then she added a postscript which said ‘I will see you in heaven or failing that hell but which ever one I hope it is not for a long time yet’. I sobbed unashamedly at these words what a brave woman she had been and that I should be ashamed sitting here shitting myself and feeling afraid. She had faced death with that same cheeky grin on her face and she had made it accept her on the terms she gave. I knew now that I would have to pull myself together and not embarrass her memory when I went to my death but to show the same courage that she had. I cuffed the tears away and got hold of my emotions then I thought only about the good times we had shared and been through together. Then it came to me like a soothing balsam wasn’t she in good company now with Charlie and Nobby and all the other friends who had gone before us.

I opened the other letter off the table and found out it was from Mrs Shaw Helen’s mother I looked at it at first fearing the worse for it was something that I knew I could not take. She explained that Helen hadn’t been able to write because she had contracted Tuberculosis and was not

well at all. I thought oh my poor darling if only I had know I would have sent letters to you full of hope and love but I hadn't and a tear slipped down my cheek again this was another kick in the balls for yours truly. I read on and Mrs Shaw said that Helen was in a sanatorium and making good progress now and the doctors expected her to make a full recovery. For this news I thanked god and I prayed to him asking him to take care of my Helen and see that she was alright I thanked him in advance but in a few days time I might be meeting him. The next line however knocked the wind straight from my sails and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Mrs Shaw had written that she thought it would be a good as time as any for me and Helen to have a break from one another as we could hardly meet up now what with Helen's condition and the offensive. She wrote that Helen had told her of our engagement and she understood why we did it but she said at the moment that we were both too young. I read on as she said that although we both thought we were in love it was only a childish infatuation with each other how could it be anything else. Please don't contact Helen until she is better and even then I would say think things through before you do. She went on I do like you William but I really do think it would be better if you both stopped seeing each other you will both be happier in the long run and will probably meet someone else. I will wish you all the best and hope you keep safe and then she had signed it. I stood with my mouth open shocked to the core and then I screamed. "Fucking Bitch!!!" The sentry had run to the window and now looked through it at me and he said. "What the hells the matter with you mate just calm down I nearly shot you before time?" Then he saw the letter in my hand and he shook his head saying. "Oh a 'Dear John' that's hard luck mate but maybe it's for the best under the circumstances", and he went back to his post.

I really was losing my mind she I would have thought would have been on our side she had always been so pleasant if anyone objected I would have thought it would have been her Helen's father. But no it was Mrs Shaw well if the fucking bitch thought I wasn't going to send a last letter to Helen then she was out of her mind. I knew that Helen still loved me with all of her heart as I did her and that when she went into the Sanatorium Mrs Shaw had been intercepting my letters and hers to make it look like we didn't care about each other anymore the evil cow. That is why I hadn't had any mail from Helen I was held now by a white rage and it's a good job that I was locked up or I would have gone A.W.O.L. and strangled Mrs Shaw. Then I would have shoved these lying words down her throat and made her choke on them the two faced bitch. I knew that I needed to settle down and think and that I had to get a letter through to Helen I would give it to George and tell him to take it to her personally on his next leave and to give her my possessions as well I would also give him this piece of shit to pass on to her then she could see what her mother had been up to. Then two days later George and Tommy Macey were allowed ten minutes with me George had tears in his eyes but I told him no time for that now and I told him about Rosie's death. They were shocked I could tell then I told them about Tommy Smith raping Rosie and that I had executed both him and Stanley before I was badly injured. Tommy Macey looked at me and I saw the steel in his eyes as he said. "Nobody's shedding any tears over them two shits everyone knows they were corpse robbers so you did right especially knowing what Smith did to Rosie as for Stanley he isn't worth the steam off a turd the parasite deserved to die." The time had come for them to go and we all hugged with tears in our eyes as they both railed at what a farce this was and how they wished they could do something like busting me out. I said. "Don't do anything silly you will only end up with me and don't forget I will see a lot of our friends and Rosie so I will have some good company." I didn't know if this was true but it seemed to put their mind at rest. I told them that Lt Howarth would pick up my last letters but the letter I was sending to and my personnel belongings I wanted George to deliver personally into Helens hands. He said to me. "That's no problem Billy Boy I won't let you down Helen will get them you have my word." I thanked him and we shook hands and then we all hugged for the last time and then they were gone leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Things were really bad now and I might have gone completely round the bend if it hadn't been for the Countess Yvette she came everyday and we talked about everything and she was true to her word and her cook now fed me meals fit for a king. Just before my execution she asked me. "Does death frighten you Billy Boy?" I was a bit taken aback by so direct a question but I saw she

was carrying her bible so I replied. "Yes I am a bit but I don't think its death itself but the pain of it and the not knowing about afterwards supposing there even is an afterwards." Yvette exhorted me saying. "You must believe in the lord my son and in the paradise to come in heaven?" I said. "I believe in god I just hope I see al my family and friends in Eden that's all." She smiled and replied. "You will do Billy Boy never be in any doubt about that", and then she prayed for me. Then we went back to talking about everything we talked about the history of the Château the war and the gardens which were a blaze of colour now. After Yvette left it suddenly struck me that I had only two days to go before my execution and this shook me quite a bit. But then again I had been through the full range of emotions from anger to fear to finally acceptance after all I could have been killed at any time either on Gallipoli or here in France and even surviving the first day of the battle was quite a feat. The only thing that really pissed me off was that I would never grow old with Helen and that we would never have children or grandchildren my branch of the Lamb family would die with me. Also I would never be able to see the new world that seemed to be emerging from the horror of this war and that would I hoped be fairer and better for everyone. I really thought that the future would be something to behold and full of marvellous things and inventions I mean just look how far the aeroplane had come. I thought if I had gone home with a good war record then I would probably have been able to get a better job. Who knew how far I would have been able to go and what I would be able to do if they weren't going to shoot me in two days time.

But it was no good thinking of the future no for I knew I had none Instead I would go to my death like a man making Helen and Rosie proud of me. I would look the firing squad in the eyes and try to show no fear and I would die like Rosie had with dignity and courage. I thought well there was one thing or at least I hoped and that was when my eyes closed for the final time there would be no more nightmares when I was dead that would be the end of them. I got up the next morning and the countesses cook had sent my breakfast I ate this at my leisure looking forward to Yvette visiting me then Lt Howarth showed up. He said to me. "Right Corporal Lamb tomorrow I will be with you all the way and we will get through this together." I replied. "Why are they going to shoot you as well Sir?" He looked like I had smacked him in the mouth with a wet codfish and stuttered out. "I apologise Corporal of course I won't face the firing squad I just wanted you to know that I will not only be here with you physically but mentally as well." I replied saying. "No it's me who should apologise Sir I suppose it is just getting to me its all the waiting around. He continued. "Who can blame you certainly not me but I'm afraid I bring more bad tidings the death sentence has been confirmed by the Commander in Chief." He looked crestfallen as he said. "Also there is no right of appeal so it looks as though you were right they want an example to be set for the troops." I actually managed to smile at him as I told him. "That's alright Sir I never expected anything different it was a foregone conclusion from the start." He said. "Well I must be going now I will leave you alone but I will be back later and I will stay for the night if that's alright by you?" I replied. "That will be fine and thank you Sir I won't be sleeping tonight after all tomorrow I will get all the sleep I will ever need." Lt Howarth looked a bit green around the gills as he left me standing there contemplating the long sleep I would get soon. It was late when Yvette turned up but she said to me. "I am sorry for being late Billy Boy but I had something I needed to do", and she put an official looking document on the table.

I looked at it as she continued saying. "I believe you are an orphan is that right?" I replied. "Well to all intents and purposes I have an uncle who I don't know is alive or dead he and his family didn't want me before and I don't think after this they will claim me as kin now." She said. "Good now if you would just sign this paper", and she pointed to the document on the table. I joked with her telling her I had no money to leave her then I saw a tear film one of her eyes so I asked. "What is the document and why do you want me to sign it?" She answered. "The Mayor myself and the villagers want you to be buried in the village cemetery if that is alright with you?" I looked at her with tears in my eyes and said. "You mean you would like me to be buried in the village cemetery and they just agreed?" She shrugged in that typical French fashion but did not deny anything or explain then she just pointed at the document. She sighed and said. "You are an orphan and when you are dead I can't

see your authorities being in the least bit bothered where you are buried. In fact they will probably shove you in a hole beside the road is that what you want?" I replied. "I don't think it will right bother me Yvette as I reckon I won't know much about it." She said to me "I think I have gotten to know you over these past few days and you remind me a lot of my youngest son who was killed on the Marne. "I apologised to Yvette and told her how sorry I was for the loss of her son and I really meant it as she was such an extraordinary woman. She continued saying. "He has no grave his body was never found and his place in the mausoleum here will lie empty I will have no place to visit him and I don't want you suffering the same fate. Your loved ones deserve to be able to come and visit your final resting place I believe everyone deserves that." I could see what she meant now and I thought about Helen maybe sometime in the future she would like to come and see my grave.

I turned to the countess saying. "Thank you Yvette and please thank the mayor and villagers I will sign the document and say no more", I signed the document then handed it to her. She rolled it up and tied it with its black ribbon and said. "You have done the right thing this document gives me the right to claim your body for burial and that the mayor and people of Saint-Marianne-Angély agree for you to be interred in the village cemetery." I smiled saying. "Thank you for your many kindnesses to a stranger and for taking pity on me especially when I have been found guilty of cowardice. She turned and replied. "Don't be silly Billy Boy nobody believed these fools with their red tabs and braid they are bumbling fool who think they can scare people into doing what they want by shooting innocent men." She stood and so did I she kissed my cheek and said. "I will try to come and see you later on but if I cannot then be sure that I will be praying for you tomorrow", and then she hugged me to her with a strength that belied her frailness. She let go of me and then continued saying. "Your grave will be tended as long as my family lives in the village and I will visit your grave everyday until the time comes when we meet again" and having said this she turned and called the guard to open the door. I was overwhelmed that so many people thought so highly of me it made me feel better about myself and it also made me stronger and I knew that I could face the ordeal in front of me now. A short time later a Chaplain appeared he apologised that it was so late and that he wished he could have got here sooner but with the battle and everything and his voice trailed off. I said to him. "Don't worry about me Padre my spiritual needs are well taken care of", he looked at me quizzically. Then he asked. "Would you like me to stay and pray with you now or hear your confession then we can ask the lord to forgive your sins?" I replied. "No thanks Sir you get off and give comfort to those other lads you were talking about I will be just fine without your prayers." With this ringing in his ears the effeminate looking shit called the guard to open the door but before he went through it he said. "I would advise you to pray for your soul my son so that it might be cleansed of the terrible sin you have committed." I replied. "Padre why don't you just get the hell out of here", and with a sound like a strangled parrot he left.

Yvette had gotten permission to come and visit me again like I've said she was the most incredible woman I was in awe of her I'm sure no one else would have been able to see me so casually. Then she said the reason was her dead husband the count had been a French General and she still had a lot of friends on the French Staff that is why she was able to come and go as she liked and how she had gotten the authorities to release my body. We had supper together and sat chatting I was not all that hungry so I just smoked and contrary to all the rules she had brought a couple of bottles of Vin Rouge with her which we were now drinking. Eventually with the first bottle finished she said. "I must go now mes enfant but rest assured your plot has been chosen and waits for you and tomorrow we will claim your body and bury you with due reverence." She kissed me on the forehead and then the lips saying. "Tonight you will be in my prayers and tomorrow show courage my son don't show them that you are afraid do not give them that satisfaction", and she called the guard and left just as Lt Howarth was entering. He had a bottle of cognac with him and he said good evening to the countess as she passed him. He sat down and I poured him some wine he said. "I have brought some cognac I thought it might be appropriate and provide us with some sustenance." I replied. "We will have the wine first and the cognac after that will put some fire in my belly and see me through my last night."

Lt Howarth never got to the cognac stage because after drinking most of the wine his head slumped onto the table and soft snores came from his mouth. I poured a glass of cognac and smiled at him before I saluted him and drank it I was feeling quite goo but I had a lot of things to do before tomorrow. I pulled my pencil and paper over to me and wrote my last letters to Mabel, Beth and to Bill Dombay I also wrote to Archie Lane the Aussie we had met in Egypt and who had served on Gallipoli. Then I wrote what would be my last ever letter to my beloved Helen I wrote how much I loved her and what she meant to me I told her the charges were trumped up and that someone had to pay for the shambles that had happened and I was one of the scapegoats. I also told her about executing Tommy Smith and that she never need fear him now I wrote she was my only love in this life or the next and that not even death could part us. I poured my heart out over Rosie's death and the agony I had suffered I then exhorted her to get on with her life and that she might one day meet someone else but I knew she would never forget me. Then I finished by telling her the most happy time of my life albeit a short one was when I first met and fell in love with her. I enclosed her mother's letter to me and asked her to read it and see what she felt about it. I told her I prayed that god would watch over her and keep her safe forever then I signed off with my undying love and the sorrow that we had not married.

The Lieutenant snored a bit louder as I put the letter into an envelope I didn't seal it though instead I took my locket from my pocket and opened it laying it on the table I poured a glass of cognac and drank it while I stared at the picture of my beloved. I don't know how long I sat there but it was getting on for first light when Lt Howarth woke himself up with a particularly loud snore. He apologised for having fallen asleep saying I should have woken him and then he looked at the cognac bottle which was three quarters empty. I shrugged my shoulders and lit another fag I coughed and thought these things are going to kill you but then I laughed at the absurdity of it. The Lieutenant smiled looking at me inquisitively but I just poured him some cognac however I could tell he was no drinker by the way his face went decidedly green looking as the glass paused under his nose. The main thing though was that he was here with me and I was grateful for that it was certainly better than being alone. He looked at me saying. "I'm sorry this has had to happen but I can assure you that Colonel Jack has fought all the way for you but it has all been to no avail HQ has got their example and whether it is right or wrong they will go ahead with the execution." I replied. "Tell Colonel Jack that I appreciate everything he has done for me I also want to thank you Sir you have been a good support throughout this ordeal." He looked quite pleased by this statement and I was glad that a few crumbs of comfort could so affect him. Then I poured the last of the cognac into my glass and tossed it back as the Provost Major with the Military Police came for me. The Major said. "Are you ready Lamb?" I replied. "No not really but I'm sure that doesn't matter", I think my face might have gone rather white or at least that's what it felt like. I took Helens letter from the table then I put my locket and ring into the envelope and sealed it I took a fag from my cigarette case lit it and gave the case and envelope to Lt Howarth. I said. "Could you see that S/Sgt Drew gets these Sir and could you post the other letters on the table yourself?" He told me that he would take care of everything then he shook my hand as the Provost Major pulled a set of manacles out and secured my hands then we left the cell. I looked to see if I could see Yvette as we crossed the garden walking on we came to a small walled orchard and I could smell the fruit on the trees then I saw a chair standing against the far wall.

I was escorted over to the chair and I saw a group of Officers off to one side I noticed the red tabs on some of them and thought fucking Staff I watched as Lt Howarth went and stood by them. I also noticed Captain Berryman there the Officer who had prosecuted me and who was there obviously to get his jollies. I was sat on the chair my manacled hands in front of me and then I was pinioned with straps across the chest and ankles I remember how fresh and clear the sun looked as it started its climb into the sky and how sweet the air tasted and the sound of every bird and insect seemed to be amplified. Major Vine the Provost Major came up and asked. "Would you like a last smoke it seems the firing party are a little late?" So I replied. "Yes why not one isn't going to kill me is it", I don't think this went down right well with the Major but who really fucking cared.

Eventually the firing squad turned up and if I hadn't been strapped to the chair I would have fallen off it for these twelve men were from my own Battalion. I looked out and had to squint a bit but I saw that my good friend Tommy Macey was the firing squad Sergeant and his face was whiter than mine and he looked like he was going to be sick. I winked at him to show that it couldn't be helped obviously he had been ordered to do this as the squad shuffled in front of me I spat out the cigarette as they halted and turned. I knew a few of the lads in the squad and then Lt Arthur Harrington was coming towards me he stopped in front of me and said. "I am so sorry Cpl Lamb that it has come to this there is no one in the Battalion who believes it is true. I'm truly sorry as well that it is men from the Battalion that have to perform this duty but the order came from the top." Then with shaking hands he pinned a white envelope to my tunic over the heart the tunic I was wearing was old and threadbare with no insignia or rank good enough for a coward to be buried in.

Lt Harrington took a black hood from his belt and went to place it over my head but I moved it I wanted people to see me and I wanted to see them after all they were murdering me. He then pleaded saying. "Please Cpl Lamb its not for you it's for them imagine how they will feel shooting a comrade who is watching them." I knew he was right and so I lowered my head and let him put the hood on me then I heard him walking away. Next I heard the voice of the effeminate Padre as he said about three words over me before I told him to fuck off and I heard him stumble away. It was dark and hot in the hood and I could hear every breath I took and every beat of my racing heartbeat. Then I heard someone read out the sentence of the court I thought it sounded like Captain Berryman but being under the hood I couldn't see. My breath was coming faster now and sweat was running down my face in sheets and I was scared now sat all alone on this chair waiting for death to come. I heard the order to present and then aim but I heard nothing else as my heart was beating so fast and loud that I thought I was going to have a heart attack. Though if I hadn't had the hood on I would have seen Lt Harrington slash his swagger stick down as the rifles discharged their rounds on the way to the target. Instead all I felt was an almighty pain in the chest as the bullets struck home and then I saw a bright light which was brighter than a thousand suns and then

Epilogue

I awoke and the light hurt my eyes the fog had gone and it was morning the young soldier Billy Lamb who had told me his story was gone as were the other people who had been stood on the station. The last thing I remember was Billy Boy finishing his story and then the shape of a train pulling up at the platform ghostly in the fog, then all of a sudden the station master was there. Then the band of pain squeezed my head and I'm sure I heard Billy Boy say. "Goodbye Johnny my story is important and must be told you are important to me don't forget", and the words trailed off. The pain was so bad now that I could no longer see and seconds later I must have passed out and I awoke damp and cold with no one about. I stood up but my legs were a bit shaky to say the least I looked at the station and could see that it had not been used for years the building was dilapidated and there were no railway lines just grass and overgrown brambles. I walked back into the ticket hall and saw the holes in the roof the advertising signs on the walls were rusted and covered in green growth and most of the brown and green tiles were missing. I walked towards the front doors which hung off their hinges at different angles and then outside to where my car was still parked taking in the village of Heskett as I did so. I noted that the village was in the same state of repair as the station and it must have been abandoned some time ago why I have no idea maybe the railway link was closed in the 60s by Beecham and the hamlet just faded away with no easy way to get to the major towns and cities. I was still in a state of shock by what had happened but I walked the village street looking at the ruins that used to be houses and cottages and thinking no wonder I couldn't get any help last night. I turned around and went back to the car like the station this was a ghost village where no one lived any more I knew that I must get somewhere and try to make sense of what had happened.

I opened the car and climbed in putting the key in the ignition and turning it the engine turned over and roared into life I put it into gear and doing a quick turn drove out of Heskett and listened as my sat-nav now started to talk to me again. As I drove along and got onto a B road heading towards Blackburn or so I hoped I thought about the extraordinary story of young William Lamb. I knew that it was something that I had to put into print so that people would know just what he had been through I knew hardly anything about the First World War but I would find out when I had finished the travel articles. Then with the money from these to sustain me for a while I would sit down and write the story I had been told and try to check up on William Lamb. But then I thought it was pretty strange that I could remember every bit of the story but I couldn't remember what happened after the lad had finished telling me the story. How I managed to drive on to my first place of call without having an accident was beyond me I just could not work out what happened, sure people see ghosts but not people like me. Then there was the whole station thing was it some kind of stopping point for lost spirits or was it something else and who or what was the station master it was driving me round the bend. But I knew that I hadn't ended up in Heskett by mistake that something had caused me to end up there and at that time in particular so I could meet the young soldier but it was also something I couldn't tell anyone. I mean who would believe that I had been lured yes that was the word lured to the village and the station and given an insight into a long gone world it had to be the soldier or some higher being working for his benefit.

In the end I finished the articles and started my research into the First World War before I started to write Billy Boy's story and what I found both thrilled and amazed me. During my research

I managed to find out that William Lamb had signed up under age and had indeed served on Gallipoli and in France. But it was after I checked into his fiancé Helen that the really jaw dropping part of this whole story came home to roost and the most fantastic part of this was that the same Helen that Billy Boy loved was my great grandma. I researched amongst records and other institutions and found out that after Billy Boy had died Helen had big falling out with her mother and came south to London. She never married but had a little girl called Wendy who turned out to be my grandmother it was after this that I looked at some old letters and photos that my mother had been given to me in a box when I was orphaned. There were letters from my mother to my father but more than this there were some letters from my great grandmother Helen to her daughter Wendy I sat down and read these. They had on the envelopes to be opened after Helen's death I took the first one out and started to read it Helen had written it as a story like Billy Boys. How she had fell madly in love when still quite young and that the boy who loved her was also very young and how they had consummated that love and Wendy was a symbol of it. That her father had never known her being killed in the Great War before her mother and he could be married and how she had fallen out with her own mother because of a letter that had been written to William for that was Wendy's fathers name. Helen had moved south with little Wendy and for social reasons had told people that she was a widow which I suppose to all intents and purposes was true. She had never forgiven her own mother for what she had wrote to her fiancé and had never returned north although her father who was relatively well off had settled a trust on her.

I had to look at the letter again everything that Billy Boy or should I say my great grandfather had told me on that station platform was true rite down to the letter he had received from Grandma Helen's mother. I read on as she described that Wendy's father William had been shot for cowardice in the war but that he was never guilty of this and that someday it would be proven, and Helen would be able to rest with him for all eternity. She went on to say that it was this that had caused the rift with her mother well this and the fact that her mother had been intercepting letters from William and not posting hers to him in the hope that they would forget each other. But she told Wendy that she would never have forgot William nor he her they loved each other so deeply that when she found out what had happened she thought that she was going to die. If it hadn't been for Wendy she would probably have killed herself so great was her loss and the circumstances of it but their love was the reason that she never married for there would never be another one like that. When she had found out that she was pregnant she had gone to her mother for help and it had been agreed that she would go away and have the baby. People were told that she had Tuberculosis and that she had been removed to a sanatorium to get well and this was how her mother had managed to control the mail between her and William. She had managed though to find out what happened as a fiend of Williams a S/Sgt George Drew had brought her his last letter and his locket, ring and cigarette case which she now passed on to Wendy. After reading what William had said she confronted her mother who didn't deny it so Helen left straight away for London taking her child with her.

Here she had managed quite well with the trust her father had set up and money she had been left from her best friend Rosie Moffat. She had worked as a nurse and brought up Wendy people thinking that she was a war widow and never asking any more questions. She exhorted Wendy and her grandchild never to think badly of William because like she had said he was no coward in fact if anything he was a hero who had been promoted on the battlefield for bravery. It was only the General's looking for scapegoats to the carnage of the Somme that had led to William's trial and this was nothing more than a mockery. I looked at the letter in my hand and a shiver went through me again reading my great grandmother's writings I could look on her with the same affection as Billy Boy had done. I put the letter to one side and picked up the other one that was there it was quite grubby and worn now with being handled frequently but this was the letter that Billy Boy had written and given to George Drew to give to Helen. I knew what it contained so I put this to one side as well and looked in the box I took out a silver cigarette case and opened it sniffing the inside which still smelled of long gone tobacco. Then I took out a single gold band and knew this was the ring that Helen had sent to Billy Boy to pledge their love for one another and tears began to

form in my eyes. I then came to a locket which I opened seeing inside it a lock of midnight black hair and a photo of an absolutely stunning young woman who I knew was my great grandmother Helen. Studying the photo I realised why Billy Boy had loved her so much she really was beautiful and had strength to her jaw that shone out and radiated strength I also realised why that bastard Tommy Smith didn't want to let her go.

I picked up another letter this one felt quite stiff and when I looked inside there were some photo's I put these to one side for the moment and opened the letter which bore a coat of arms at the top. I started to read it and realised that it was from the Countess Yvette and that she had written it and given it to George Drew to be passed on to Helen it told all about the village giving a place for Billy Boy's burial in the cemetery there. The countess told how she had befriended Billy Boy in his last days but I already knew all this and so I skipped ahead and read the invitation that she had sent to Helen saying that anytime she wanted to visit the grave she would stay at the Château as a guest of the countess. She also said that she had included some photos that she had taken to familiarise Helen with the village and also Billy Boys grave and that she hoped that she liked the spot they had picked for his last resting place. I put the letter down and picked up the old photos the first one I held up showed a very austere woman dressed in black but you could see that she was every inch an aristocrat by her face and jaw line her eyes also looked quite piercing even on an old photo. I had no doubt that this was the Countess Yvette I put the photo down and looked at the next one that showed the Château of Saint-Marianne-Angléy where Billy Boy had been executed. I went on to the next photo that showed a lone grave near either an oak or beech tree with a simple wooden cross at its head which bore a plaque but I could not read it no matter how hard I tried. I put everything back and set about my task of writing my great grandfather's story telling it exactly how he had told me and when it was finished I knew that it was good. I presented it to a publisher who snapped it up and I made the best sellers list taking the number one spot but I was fully involved and committed to right the wrongs of that long ago war. But before I took up the gauntlet on behalf of my great grandfather and men and boys like him who were shot for very little reason I knew that there was a personal pilgrimage that I had to make and so I set off.

The sun shone brightly as I strode through the village street of Saint-Marianne-Angléy breathing in the smell of the new morning air and scented flowers that danced on it. I had stopped the night with the Count whose name was Françoise at the Château Saint-Marianne-Angléy the Count had offered to take me to my grandfathers grave but I think he realised that this was a trip I had to make alone so he gave me directions. I walked out of the village and up the hill I could see the gates of the cemetery coming into view and I walked up to them entering into a well tended graveyard. I could see the big oak at the top of the cemetery standing like a sentinel and I made my way through the other graves to it. As I got up to it I saw that it had changed from the photo the wooden cross had gone and the heap of soil was now an edged in bed of very white marble chippings which held a vase of freshly cut flowers. In place of the wooden cross there was now a marble angel with a plaque at the base on which was inscribed 'Here lies the body of William Lamb who was murdered by his own side on.....' then under this an epitaph 'Judge not lest ye be judged'. I had tears in my eyes as I read these words and realised that the Countess had stuck to her promise and that my great grandfather's grave had been looked after and I knew always would be. The view from here took in the countryside around and I knew that Billy Boy would have liked it I sat down under the Oak tree and thought about Billy Boy and Helen and about their love and unselfishness. I must have dozed because when I awoke the sun was beginning to set but I was at peace and I knew I had fulfilled what my great grandfather had wanted me to do and that was to prove he was no coward but the proper fight would begin when I returned to Britain. I stood up and walked down the mound from where the Oak tree stood I had reached the gates nearly and something I don't know what made me turn to look at the grave again. In the fading light I saw a young soldier in uniform and by his side a stunning young woman in a lilac dress they lifted their arms and waved at me and then the soldier saluted me as I stood there with my mouth open the woman blew me a kiss and then they were gone. I walked out of the cemetery and down the lane and tears ran down my cheeks as I knew that my great grandfather

and grandmother had been reunited for eternity and because of writing his story they could now rest in peace with together the stain removed from his soul.